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The Branded Hand; or, The Man of Mystery.

BY FRANK DUMONT,

Author of "Wide-Awake," "Marked for Life," "In the Web," etc., etc.



"Stand back, cowards! The first that approaches me will lie a bleeding corpse upon this deck. I am an American and I protect a lady in distress wherever I find her, and against all odds, and against all such cutthroats as now oppose me."

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OR,
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CHAPTER I.

THE GIRL STOWAWAY FINDS A PROTECTOR.

The first rays of the morning sun were vainly endeavoring to pierce the lowering clouds that a brisk wind was scattering to and fro. The waters of the Gulf of Mexico were rolling in foam-covered billows, and occasionally the wind lashed them into fury. It was the last struggle of the terrific tempest that had swept the Gulf throughout the night; and, in fact, for several days previous the storm-fiend had ruled with despotic sway over the waste of waters.

A large vessel was scudding before the wind, and her canvas and rigging displayed the havoc of the midnight tempest. The deck was littered with the debris of the havoc, and her crew were busily engaged in putting things ship-shape. A trembling negro stood near the cabin, grasping a sauceman, and about to descend the steep stairway. Every lurch of the ship threatened to hurl him head-first into the cabin below.

Some expression uttered by the chattering black had evidently awakened the derision of the sailors, for a loud burst of laughter greeted the Ethiopian as he staggered toward the stairway.

"Dat's right, laugh! laugh! he! he! he! You won't believe me, will you? I tell you dat dis ole ship is ha'nted, and you can't deny it! I've heerd strange sounds and noises eb'ry night for a week, and I see'd a real live ghost down in de cellar of de ship, when I went to get some 'taters. It had eyes like a elephant, and horns like dat gem'man has dat bosses de brimstone foundry. Dat ghost said: 'Washington Jones, leff dem 'taters be!'"

Another burst of laughter greeted the negro's words, and a violent lurch of the vessel flung him half-way down the steep stairs. Nothing daunted, he crept up again.

"All right, mister sailor mans," he exclaimed; "you see for yerselves how stormy it has been all de week. Nuffin' but thunder and lightning, day and night. Dat's a bad sign—bad sign," said he, with a shudder. "Dar's a 'Jonah' on dis ship—"

Before Washington Jones could finish the sentence a huge wave struck the vessel, and the shock sent the negro headlong down the stairway. There was a sound of broken crockery and tin pans, as the darky landed in their midst and floundered about, striving to regain his feet. He did not return to the deck, but satisfied himself by clinging to every available support to avoid another catastrophe. A roar of laughter greeted the negro's precipitate descent into the stairway.

A stout, villainous-looking personage, standing at the rail, came forward at this juncture. His face was partially hidden by the sandy beard that ornamented the lower part of his countenance, and the fierce mustache that covered the upper lip. Cold, restless gray eyes twinkled beneath eyebrows that joined each other above a flat nose. The eyebrows gave his features a perpetual scowling aspect. He was attired in a rough pea-jacket, and wore a vest and pantaloons of dark blue material.

This person was Jasper Daniels, the second in command of the vessel, and noted for his brutality to the mixed crew of the ship.

"The nigger is right!" said he. "There is something wrong. Look there!" and he pointed out several floating objects that glistened in the straggling sunbeams. "Icebergs! and I'll warrant you've never seen them in these waters before. We make no headway, because we have been blown out of our course. There is a 'Jonah' on board of the Sea Serpent!"

"Overboard with the Jonah! Toss him into the sea!" yelled the excited men.

"Wait until you have discovered who it is, and when you do, cast him overboard, or we are all lost," said Jasper.

A hoarse shout of rage escaped from the crew and they swarmed down into the hold to search and hold a consultation. The words of the negro had awakened a strange suspicion. The ghost seen by the darky corresponded with a strange form that had flitted on board when the vessel was about to depart. Jasper surmised that a stowaway had secured a hiding-place in the hold, and that the negro had prob-

ably seen the person, and his terror pictured it as a ghostly visitor. As the cargo of the vessel was of a peculiar nature, Jasper concluded that, if there was a stowaway in the hold, he was there for other reasons than a passage. By appealing to the crew and denouncing the hidden person as the Jonah—or rather the cause of the gale and ill-luck—he could have the ship searched and the intruder discovered. At any other time the sailors would have shielded a poor stowaway from the brutal mate's wrath, but by picturing the terrors and laying the same upon any person, the superstitious Spaniards, Portuguese and Mexicans forming the crew would rend the unfortunate "Jonah" limb from limb.

"Superstitious set," said Jasper, with a hollow laugh; "but we need that kind for our business. We have arms and ammunition for the Mexican Government, but I dare say that Captain Alvarez would sell the cargo to either faction that could produce the coin. Some folks would call that queer business. If our few passengers only knew of the powder stowed beneath this deck!"

The negro's face, spattered with flour, appeared at the stairway, and his teeth chattered like a pair of castanets. "Don't talk about powder! I feel as if I war sitting on a bomb-shell. S'pose somebody was to drop a match down dar! 'Way goes de whole lot ob us like sky-rockets."

As if to echo the darky's moan of terror came a wailing voice from the cabin—a peculiar voice with a strong Hibernian accent. The next moment a wiry little figure came forth, pale, and unsteady upon his feet, clutching a brandy flask with one hand and holding the railing with the other. He staggered to the side of the vessel.

"Arrah, wurra wurra! bad luck to ould Neptune and the whole family of him! Why did I come aboard again whin we stopp'd at dry land, a week ago? Here I am sick and the sailors grinning at me, and meself a-rolling and creeping on my hands and knees like a sick cat."

"Why don't you eat some fat pork and cabbage?" shouted the negro.

"Hould on there, ye black-faced thafe! Don't you spake of anything grasy to me!" gasped the Irishman. "Oh! why did I come out wid Master Richard to see dirty ould Mexico—oh!"

A violent lurch of the vessel knocked the Hibernian off his feet, and a wave deluged him. Sputtering and blinded by the water, he arose and clutched at the nearest stationary object to steady himself.

"I say, captain, can't you do something to steady the ship? Sure's my name's Phelim McNamara, I'll die on board of your ould tub. Oh dear, what'll I do?"

Phelim had scarcely ceased his wailing, when a robust form emerged from the cabin. The person was short and exceedingly fat. Like the Irishman, his face was of a deathly pallor, caused by the motion of the vessel. To add to the comical appearance of the stout personage, he wore a white night-cap and bore several large sausages.

He made tremendous dives to grasp at every object to refrain from falling or prevent being hurled to the deck.

"Oh, vot is de matter mit dot ships?" he groaned. "Oh, let me get out and I will walk home!"

"Take away them ould sausages! The sight o' them makes me sicker," cried Phelim, and finding a secure place he held on while upbraiding the stout German for exposing the sausages to his view.

Jasper was about to enter the cabin when a tall, dark man emerged from it. His swarthy features were shaded by a broad felt hat. A black mustache shaded thin lips that partially disclosed gleaming white teeth—teeth not unlike the fangs of a wolf. It was Alvarez, the commander of the vessel.

"Captain!" exclaimed Jasper.

"Ah! Pleasant weather, after all," said the dark personage, with a cruel smile as if the sunbeams were unwelcome.

"Yes, captain. But see! Yonder are a few icebergs," and Jasper pointed out the glittering mass on the horizon.

"Jasper, bring my glass!"

The mate entered the cabin to secure the instrument.

"Bring me von glass, too!" shouted the German, endeavoring to cross over to the larboard side and join the captain.

Jasper returned from the cabin and placed the telescope in the hands of the captain, who took a long and searching sweep of the horizon.

"Sav, captain. I don't vos know how to

swim," whined the obese passenger, twirling the sausages nervously.

"I say, captain, couldn't ye tell the feller at the wheel beyant to drive the ship over where the wather isn't so rough?" And Phelim clutched the rail and attempted to attract Alvarez's attention.

Neither Jasper nor the captain took the slightest notice of the two sea-sick passengers, and the German and the Irishman cursed them roundly in their mother tongue.

Alvarez handed the telescope to Jasper, who continued observing the icebergs, while the captain walked forward and gazed upon the broad, rolling expanse of waters.

"I must abandon this life," his thoughts took form. "Why should I risk so much when I can remain in Mexico in comfort? I hold documents that will secure a fortune whenever I choose to claim it. Although blood has been shed to obtain them, yet no living being can point to me and accuse me. The estates were willed to an only child, and I was appointed the guardian. In case of the child's death the fortune was mine. In an evil moment I dyed these hands with my friend's blood and securing these papers, placed the little girl on a strange vessel sailing for South America. One stroke of the knife and a fortune was at my disposal. It was not my first crime, for the cursed brand of a felon was seared in my flesh—a mark that I will carry to my grave."

A loud shout arose from the depths of the hold, and the stamping of feet resounded as of a body of men pursuing some object. Then came a thrilling scream—a woman's scream of fright.

A little form bounded upon deck from the companionway, and close behind her came the infuriated sailors in pursuit. Alvarez remained passive and watched the proceedings from the bow.

"What's this?" cried Jasper, as the girl and the sailors appeared on deck.

"A stowaway! We found her and she's the Jonah!" cried the foremost sailor, and several rushed forward to seize her.

The girl screamed and eluded the ruffian.

As she rushed toward the cabin a stalwart young man suddenly emerged from it and the girl was caught in his extended arms. One blow from his fist struck the nearest pursuer and the ruffian fell headlong to the deck.

CHAPTER II.

YOUNG AMERICA AND ERIN GO BRAGH.

The swarthy sailors drew back and a cry of rage burst from their lips.

The young man who had rushed from the cabin at this critical moment held the girl in his arms and his flashing eyes told of the indignation that welled up from his heart.

"Oh, save me, sir, or they will kill me!" said the shrinking form as she crept nearer to him to avoid the scowling circle of faces that glared both upon the girl and her rescuer.

"Look up! You are safe! Sailors attacking a woman! Shame on you! I thought you were men!" cried the youth, bitterly.

The ruffian known as Jasper stepped forward and his harsh voice commanded silence as he addressed the girl's companion.

"She's a spy and a stowaway. I won't have her on this vessel!" he declared.

"She's a Jonah!" chimed in several sailors.

"Don't let them harm me!" plead the girl in piteous tones, as she turned her pale but beautiful face toward her protector.

"They will not harm you. I will protect you with my very life! He who lays a finger upon you will answer to me for the act."

Hardly had the words issued from the lips of the young American when Jasper drew a murderous-looking knife, and in a voice choking with passion, he cried:

"Down with him, lads, if he interferes. Seize the girl!"

"Stand back, cowards! The first that approaches me will lie a bleeding corpse upon this deck. I am an American and I protect a lady in distress wherever I find her, and against all odds, and against all such cutthroats as now oppose me."

Even while speaking he gently placed the girl at his side and faced the murderous circle that encompassed him.

"Down with the American!" yelled the scowling villains, drawing still nearer.

"Oh, do not quarrel with them," besought the girl as she saw the gleam of weapons in the hands of the lawless men; "they will kill you."

"I have faced death too often to allow these blustering ruffians to frighten me. Cling to me; I will protect you," and the young Ameri-

can's hand sought a concealed pocket within his coat.

"Surrender!" cried Jasper, "for we're all against one."

"That's a lie for you!" cried Phelim, staggering over from the bulwark of the vessel. "Yer all against two, for I'm taking a hand in this circus. I'm wid you, Master Richard!"

The Irishman removed his coat and gave vent to a wild "hurroo." "Who'll tread on the tail ov me coat?" he cried. "We're two against the whole cowardly pack!"

"Stop von leetle! Ve vas dree against de whole pack of cards!" shouted the stout German, waddling over and flourishing his sausages. "Go in, Irish! I'm mit you! Look out; I'll shoot you mit a bologneie revolver!" and the stout Teuton pointed the sausage at the sailors to intimidate them, and capered about to add emphasis to the threat.

"Fools!" hissed Jasper; "your blood be upon your own heads! Down with them, boys; no quarter!"

With an angry shout resembling the yelp of hungry wolves, the sailors rushed forward and a hand-to-hand conflict ensued. Richard grasped Jasper and sent the ruffian reeling to the deck with one well-directed blow that brought blood from his nose and mouth.

Carl Stoppelheimer, the obese German, floundered into the midst of the ruffians and managed to trip one, and when the sailor lay upon the deck Carl seated himself upon the prostrate villain and pounded him with the hard sausage. Phelim struck out right and left with as much energy as he would have exhibited at Donnybrook Fair.

When Jasper fell headlong to the deck, a heavy revolver dropped from a hidden receptacle and rolled to the girl's feet. In an instant she had seized it and as the ruffian sprung to his feet, he rushed forward with a brutal oath upon his lips. He started back as if he had received the bite of an adder for the muzzle of the revolver was directed at his forehead, the girl's finger upon the trigger! Her eyes were dilated with excitement. Jasper read determination in her looks and his hand sought the missing pistol.

A tall commanding form glided quickly between the combatants and his voice arose above the shouts. It was the captain of the Sea Serpent—Alvarez.

"What is the meaning of this tumult?" said he, in a voice trembling with passion.

"It means that we found a stowaway," answered Jasper, "and that American interfered. He has struck me, but his life will pay the penalty of that blow."

"Leave all to me," commanded Alvarez, in a low whisper to Jasper. "I will give you a chance to retaliate in a short time. Take the men forward."

Without a murmur the low-browed villain led the sailors away from the spot and they gathered in a group on the forward part of the vessel, while Carl and Phelim descended into the cabin.

Alvarez approached the young American.

"I will look into this affair, sir," he said, "and have the ringleaders punished. They owe you an apology, and you will receive it, rest assured!"

The latter part of the sentence was spoken somewhat sharp, and in a tone of voice that aroused the young man from his semi-reverie caused by the mute look of appeal that rested upon the girl's features as Alvarez approached.

But, ere Richard could reply, the dark man had turned and entered the cabin.

"You have saved my life! Tell me how I can thank and bless you," she murmured.

"Do not mention thanks to me, my poor trembling little one. Look up! The danger is past. I have merely performed my duty as a man in protecting you from the attack of ruffians. Tell me what is your name?"

"Eldora!" replied the girl.

"Eldora! A very pretty name," said Richard. "Now tell me how came you to be concealed in the hold of this vessel?"

"When this vessel was in port, a week ago, I silently stole on board and concealed myself in the hold. I had no money to pay for my passage and I wished to reach Mexico—for a secret purpose. I can trust you for you are a friend. I am the daughter of a patriot, long since in his grave, sent there by the hand of a cowardly assassin."

"And you are a spy in the service of the patriot cause of Mexico?" demanded the young man in a low whisper.

"Yes; but let me tell you all: I was but a child when my dear father fell by the hand of

one who professed to be his dearest friend. This man had the care of the documents concerning our estates. One night this false friend slew my father and robbed him of these papers. I was placed upon a strange vessel outward bound. When I again ventured to my native country I was treated as an adventuress and an impostor. The villain held the papers and I was an outcast—almost a beggar."

Tears filled the sad eyes and she paused to check them. "I have but one object in life—to find the murderer. I have wandered for years—sometimes close to the object of my search and again at times far away. But I feel and know I shall yet meet him, face to face."

"And you have never seen this man—the murderer of your father?" queried Richard.

At this moment the evil face of Alvarez appeared behind the mast and the eyes of the listener were fixed upon the young couple standing not a dozen feet away and his ears drank in every word they uttered.

"On the night of the crime," continued Eldora, "I heard my father's cry of help. Child as I was I rushed to his assistance. I seized the masked assassin by the arm and as he threw me aside I saw by the lightning's flash through the window, deeply imprinted in the palm of his hand, the letter A."

A suppressed cry reached the ears of the young couple. Both turned, but failed to discover the crouching form, behind the mast, whose pallid features were concealed by its shadow.

"The letter A—that is a clew," said the young American. "It was the custom, years ago, in these countries, to brand criminals—to burn a letter in their arm or brow. Very often in the palm of the hand. The letter A signifies 'Assassin.'"

Again the muffled cry from the direction of the mast, and Alvarez's eyes were fixed upon the palm of his hand.

"This she!" he gasped. "Since that fatal night the ravages of the small-pox have furnished a mask for my features. I am safe while I keep this accursed mark concealed." And he glided silently and unobserved to the cabin.

Instead of entering the cabin, however, Alvarez paused, and placing a silver whistle to his lips blew a shrill blast upon it that brought Jasper and the motley crew to his side. He led the way toward the young couple. They followed at his heels like a swarm of hungry cubs.

"There stands the person you seek," said he, pointing to Eldora. "She is a spy. You know the nature of our cargo! Cast her into the sea!"

A wild yell came from each throat, and the swarthy, bearded ruffians prepared again to rush upon the American and his charge.

"Cowards! would you murder this trembling girl? You, sir—you call yourself captain of this vessel, and yet you order your men to lay violent hands upon a woman? Touch her if you dare and I'll spatter your brains upon the mast of this vessel!" and Richard drew a polished weapon and cocked it.

"This vessel is mine," warned Alvarez; "I am master here; to disobey is mutiny!"

"You may be master of your ship and the dogs that now surround you, but you are not my master! This girl is under my protection. Remember I am a passenger and claim my rights as such! Approach me at your peril."

"Make ready a rope for our American gentleman!" ordered Alvarez; "I'll hang him from the yard-arm!"

"Villain! Pirate!" said Richard, with a withering look, "I defy you!"

Several dark forms had crept behind the young American unobserved, and as he uttered the defiance the treacherous scoundrels sprung upon him, and although he fought like a tiger his hands were secured.

A group with loaded pistols stood at the cabin door to prevent Phelim and Carl from interference.

"Make the battle an equal one!" called out Richard. "Let us meet each other face to face. I dare you!"

Alvarez presented a pistol at Richard's temple. "I'd send a bullet into your brain only I wish to see you dangle from the yard-arm. Slip that rope around the brave American's neck!" commanded the villain, with a sneer.

The rope encircled his throat and the ruffians seized the end of it with yells of satisfaction.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE VERY JAWS OF DEATH.

The piratical-looking ruffians eagerly awaited

the signal of their leader to launch the young American into eternity.

With clasped hands Eldora watched the proceedings, and prayed for Richard's safety. A figure crept out of the hatchway and glided into a mass of cordage and rent sails, just as "Sail ho!" was shouted by a hoarse voice from the larboard side of the vessel.

Alvarez bounded to the rail and his eyes rested upon the approaching sail. "Is the cannon loaded and ready for use?" he shouted.

"Ay, loaded with grape and canister!" cried Jasper, as he rushed toward a black cannon mounted near midship. It was upon a swivel, and its black muzzle swept the four points of the compass at the gunner's will.

"String up the American, and then we'll attend to this sail!" shouted Alvarez.

Eldora bounded toward the captain and sunk upon her knees at his feet. "Spare him—cast me into the sea, but do not harm him!" she cried.

"Out of my way, girl! you plead in vain." Alvarez's face scowled malignantly upon the kneeling figure, as if he would hurl her from his path.

"Arise, Eldora! Kneel not to that brute," said Richard. "I will show them how an American can meet death—"

"Haul away on that rope!" yelled Alvarez.

The ruffians seized it with a will, and the youth's feet had barely left the deck when the form that crouched in the debris leaped forward, and with a keen knife severed the rope with one sweeping blow.

In an instant Richard's arms were free, and a pistol was placed in his grasp, while Phelim—for it was he who had severed the rope—seized an iron bar.

The astonished ruffians stood petrified for an instant, but Alvarez's voice called them to their senses.

"Cut them down—no quarter!" he howled, and sprang like an infuriated beast at the American.

Phelim hurled his iron bar right and left, clearing a passage through the swarthy ruffians.

Richard's pistol cracked as Alvarez darted toward him and the villain's arm fell, limp, at his side.

Jasper wielded a cutlass and like a fiend he attacked Phelim who defended himself with his iron bar.

Richard soon found himself surrounded by a dozen yellow-faced Portuguese and Greasers, with gleaming knives upraised against him.

The revolver cracked spitefully several times, and at each report a form tumbled to the deck and writhed in death-agonies.

Alvarez saw the girl's champion occupied by the sailors and the villain was quick to reach Eldora's side and prevent her from rejoining Richard.

"Make no effort to elude me or you die upon the spot," he shouted.

His face was distorted by the pain of his wounded arm, and by the fierce passion that was consuming him.

Rapidly was the sail approaching the Sea Serpent, and Jasper sought to end the combat immediately.

Alvarez grasped the shrinking girl and his voice fairly stilled her beating heart. His very touch almost rendered her senseless. Her eyes sought the form of her protector. She saw Richard defending himself from a circle of armed ruffians who drew nearer to him every moment. The contest was raging in the forward part of the vessel.

One look at the scene of action and the slumbering courage was aroused within her. She freed herself from Alvarez's grasp and ere she could realize her intentions she had gained the side of the cannon and passed behind it.

With one supreme effort she turned the gun and directed the muzzle toward the struggling group forward. She seized the string and the hammer raised; Alvarez shrunk back confused! Her voice, like a shrill trumpet blast, reached the ears of the struggling youth. "This way, sir, and you are saved!"

In a moment he comprehended the situation and was at her side. A roar of consternation and dismay broke from the baffled villains as they saw Richard elude them and join the figure behind the cannon. They saw the black gaping muzzle of the loaded gun pointed directly toward them and their hands fell powerless to their sides.

The gun swept the deck, and there was no chance of avoiding the storm of grape and canister that the iron weapon would belch forth if the hammer descended upon the percussion cap.

The girl held the string, but a hundred

chances were against her. Her uncertain fingers might fail to draw the hammer with sufficient strength. Jasper saw this chance, and quickly seized upon it.

"Down with her, boys! The cannon is not loaded, and she cannot handle it anyway!"

A chorus of wild shouts followed Jasper's voice, and the scowling ruffians came dashing forward, uttering cries that resembled the shrieks of baffled savages.

Eldora pulled the string; a blinding flash leaped from the gun's muzzle; a deafening roar—a terrific explosion—that seemed to rend the vessel in twain, and make every timber shiver and groan. A storm of missiles swept the deck, and an appalling cry came from the mangled forms that rolled and writhed upon the blood-stained floor.

The sulphurous smoke was wafted aside by the breeze, and the scene of carnage was exposed to view. The deck was littered with splintered timber, and the prostrate bodies of the sailors lay among the dead and the dying. At the same moment a lurid flame burst from the companionway, and a wreath of smoke curled upward. The vessel was in flames!

Nearer drew the vessel that had been desecrated from the larboard side.

Richard gazed among the dead and the survivors, but failed to discover either Jasper or the villainous captain of the Sea Serpent. Both had vanished.

"There he goes, bad 'cess to him! May Ould Nick fly away wid him!"

A small boat was drifting away from the doomed vessel, and in this craft was Alvarez and his confederate, Jasper. The burning vessel and the clouds of smoke hid the escaping villains from those upon the ship, and also from those upon the approaching vessel.

Alvarez had fired the craft, and in seizing upon the only boat, had, in company with his partner in guilt, escaped from the burning and now sinking vessel.

Phelim's quick eyes had detected the yawl as it drifted away upon the crest of the dark waves, and the Irishman fired a harmless shot after the escaping wretches.

Clouds of thick black smoke now hung like a canopy over the ill-fated Sea-Serpent, and the cries of the wounded men made the scene hideous. Flames shot up from the cabin, and forked tongues of fire came from the companion-way.

Suddenly the negro's form appeared beside Richard, and with a hollow gasp he fell trembling at the American's feet.

"Oh! master! master! save dis chile! Dar's gwine to be a Judgment Day on dis ship. Take me wid you— Oh! dat stuff down in de hold of dis vessel!"

"What? Speak, man!" said Richard, as he gazed upon the form of the terror-stricken negro.

"De ship is on fire and de hold is full of powder!" exclaimed the darky.

"Powder! Howly mackerel! We're all kilt and buried!" shouted Phelim, and he sprang nimbly to the bulwarks as if to plunge overboard, but he paused as if an idea had suddenly flashed into his brain and his features paled.

"I can't swim a stroke!" he gasped.

The startling intelligence communicated by the negro caused Richard to grasp Eldora gently and bear her toward the bulwark of the burning vessel. In the hold of the ship was the inflammable material and many kegs of powder. Fully one-half of these had been broken during the sway of the tempest and the black explosive lay in heaps among the kegs. One spark of fire would launch the vessel and every living person on board to destruction.

The approaching craft was yet too far away to render any assistance and the flames would reach the magazine within a few minutes.

The lower deck was now a mass of roaring flames that swept everything before its billows of fire. One spark would prove fatal to the human beings on the upper deck.

Richard seized an ax and instantly dislodged some timber which Phelim, assisted by Carl and the negro, cast overboard after lashing the fragments together, and securing the floating mass to the vessel's side. In a few minutes the flames had reached the deck and those there were forced to retreat before the volumes of blinding, suffocating smoke.

Richard assisted Eldora over the side of the vessel and by clinging to the rope stairway she reached the frail, wave-tossed raft. Richard followed, and Phelim, Carl and the negro were soon upon the float and the fastenings were severed. A huge wave bore the bulky mass

upon its crest and swept it away from the burning vessel.

From the deck of the Sea Serpent came the wailing, piteous cries of the wounded men as the flames swept over them, burning and destroying everything in its fiery path.

Suddenly there was a blinding sheet of living flames that shot up into the murky sky. A dull booming sound and a crash that almost stunned the fugitives upon the raft.

The waters seemed to open like the crater of a volcano, and the group on the floating timbers sunk into a vortex of boiling, seething waters that seemed to engulf them beneath the furious billows. The air seemed to be one sheet of flame and smoke.

Richard clung to the trembling form and clutched at the fastenings of the raft as the structure sunk into the watery abyss. When it arose to the surface again, all were clinging to the frail timbers excepting the darky. The waves had swept him away. Eldora lay senseless in Richard's arms.

CHAPTER IV.

IDIOT VERSUS VILLAIN.

SEVERAL months had elapsed since the startling events related in the opening chapters, and Richard Denver had traveled throughout Mexico, accompanied by his servant, Phelim McNamara. The young American had received leave of absence, and, doffing his uniform, he had started for a short pleasure trip through the distracted land of revolutions and bloodshed. Richard had reached Mexican territory after being rescued from the raft by the strange vessel.

A most mysterious affair was the sudden disappearance of Eldora.

When the vessel arrived at Tampico she silently stole ashore, and in spite of Richard's search he failed to discover any traces of the fugitive.

After a few weeks of inquiry and travel he abandoned the search and concluded that Eldora had avoided him purposely, and remained concealed in order to not again meet him.

Phelim mused over the young man's actions, and criticized them inwardly.

"What's the matter wid him? I'll bet he's in love wid her! And her a-running away from him." And Phelim would indulge in a laugh at Richard's anxiety and fruitless search.

The shadows of twilight were fast settling upon the tropical scenery, and the song-birds made the evening air vocal with their last tribute to the dying day.

Upon the left side of the Vera Cruz road, nestling in masses of wild vines, stood the old weather-beaten inn where Richard and Phelim were to pass the night. The young man sat upon the porch smoking a fragrant cigar, while Phelim puffed clouds of smoke from a short, black pipe.

"Phelim, I believe I will return to the States," said Richard.

Phelim bounded from his chair with joyful surprise, and taking the pipe from his lips, gazed at the young man to assure himself that he had heard aright.

"Ah, then, Master Richard, it's sensible ye are. I'm sick o' seeing the yaller-faced divils, and seeing the snakes and the pizon bugs of this outlandish country, so I am. Faith, a dog wouldn't live out here. Begorra, yer right! Let's go home."

A hobbling figure, whose head and features were hidden beneath a large hood, passed the building and entered it by a side door. Once the figure of the old woman paused as if regarding the two men upon the porch, and then it disappeared in the low and narrow doorway.

"I am sure 'tis he," she murmured; "and thanks to my disguise, I baffled detection. He is to remain here to-night, and it may be fatal to him. They seek his life, but I will baffle them. In this disguise I may pursue my investigations. Ah!"

The exclamation was caused by the appearance of a man who entered the large room of the inn.

Heavy black whiskers concealed the dark features, partly visible beneath the wide sombrero that he wore.

The man advanced to the tap-room and addressed the sleepy tapster.

At the first sound of the dark man's voice the hooded figure started visibly and a shudder swept through her frame.

In spite of the disguise she had recognized the voice of Alvarez.

A second later and the well-known form of Jasper entered the taproom and greeted the disguised ruffian.

Both men sat down near a table and leaned across in ordered to prevent their conversation from reaching the tapster. The hooded figure was seated near the window apparently asleep.

"Who's that?" said Jasper, pointing toward the nodding form.

"An old woman—deaf as a post. She's been about here for several days. You can talk as loud as you please; no fear that she will hear us. Don't you think I did a wise thing in securing a lease of this old building? It affords us a rare chance for our business and under its cloak we work our affairs in security! Under the name of Senor Gonsalvo who would recognize the revolutionist Alvarez?"

"That's so," declared Jasper. "But this is indeed a surprise, isn't it?"

"You allude to the American seated upon the porch? He has ventured into a trap from which he will never venture forth again!"

"He has large sums of money," added Jasper; "we can pay off an old score, and reap a harvest at the same time."

"Yes; but keep out of his way. He might recognize you. Excite his suspicions and the game is lost," warned Alvarez, in a somewhat lower tone. "To-night he must be entrapped into the lower room and plied with liquor. If nothing else will do I'll force a quarrel upon him and dispatch him at once."

"Very well. I'll be on hand. I still remember the blow that he struck me on the deck of the Sea Serpent and I long to avenge it," and Jasper brought his clenched fist down upon the table with terrible emphasis.

"Have patience. He is in a web and cannot break its meshes. Fate has led him to this place and it will be his grave!" Alvarez arose from the table and led the way to a door in the furthest wall, and unlocked it.

"Come," said he, "examine the room and I will show you the secret panel in the wall."

Both ruffians passed out from the room.

"What shall I do?" murmured the woman.

"How can I warn him of his danger? How can I avert it? He has saved my life and I must prevent these villains from carrying out their plan. Ah! too late!" she gasped, and drawing the hood down upon her forehead she passed out the narrow doorway. She drew back with a shudder, for the black-whiskered landlord of the inn was engaging Richard in conversation. At first the young man started, for something in the dark man's voice sounded familiar. The wily rascal noticed this and instantly spoke in a subdued key, thoroughly disguising his voice.

Eldora—for it was she disguised in the flowing gown and large hood—passed out upon the road and hobbled away.

The brave girl had formed her plan and that was to return to the inn and if it came to the worst to openly warn the young American and denounce the villains. But, upon reflection, Eldora, who knew the desperate character of the men, resolved to wait until Alvarez had withdrawn into the house and then reveal herself to Richard and warn him.

To her chagrin she saw Richard enter the building, following the man who was leading him into the trap he had prepared!

"I must enter that building again," murmured Eldora, and she disappeared in the shadows only to pause at the foot of a huge oak and take from its hollow trunk a package, which she opened and selected from the clothing it contained a jaunty Mexican jacket and cap, and several other articles of wearing apparel.

While Eldora is thus busily engaged with the contents of the mysterious bundle we will glance within the old inn and follow Richard into the room where Alvarez and his confederates lay in wait for the young American.

Alvarez had managed to exclude Phelim, and the youth found himself alone with the black-whiskered landlord in a poorly lighted room where the white-washed rafters hung low.

A flight of rickety steps led to the door above and this seemed to be the only outlet to the room.

A rough table and a half-dozen chairs completed the furniture of the apartment.

"Take a seat, sir. This is a very poor apartment, but then it is quiet and no one ever intrudes. Myself and a few friends pass many a pleasant evening in this place. Be seated!"

Richard obeyed mechanically. Again that peculiar voice rung in his ears and the youth racked his brain to remember when and where he had heard it. The face was strange but the voice recalled a previous meeting.

A secret door in the wall opened and several

persons entered the apartment. One bore a tray upon which were several bottles and glasses. He placed the tray upon the table and seated himself.

"Gentlemen, this is my friend, Richard Denver, from the States," said Alvarez uncorking a bottle and filling the glasses. "You will drink his health and better acquaintance."

The glasses were raised and Richard was about to drink when a commotion ensued, seemingly in the hallway.

The secret door opened and two rough Mexicans dragged a struggling figure into the room.

It was a boy, whose vacant stare and hollow laugh proclaimed at once that reason had fled.

His features were very dark, and long raven black curls escaped from the cap that he wore. He thrust aside the two men who had brought him into the room and gazed idiotically at the assembled group.

"What's this, Sanchez?" demanded Alvarez. The dusky ruffian addressed as Sanchez stepped forward.

"We discovered this boy prowling 'round the house—actually trying to force open a door, so we brought him in."

"Very well, I'll attend to him," said Alvarez, and then, in a lower tone meant for Sanchez alone, he added—"remain here within call."

The two ruffians strolled toward the door and sat down upon the bare floor.

A person descended the steps and locked the door after him.

It was Jasper. He kept his features turned away from the young American and joined the Mexicans at the table. Alvarez saw the look of inquiry resting upon Richard's face and he approached the idiot.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"Outside," responded the idiot, with a vacant stare.

"I mean how did you get in here?"

"Through the door—ha! ha! ha!"

Alvarez grew impatient, for he knew that Richard was watching the proceedings.

"What do you want here?"

"Nothing!"

"Indeed? We'll soon see about that!"

"I know something," and the idiot laughed as he twirled around upon one foot, "but I ain't going to tell anybody!"

"That's right," said Alvarez; "a still tongue makes a wise head. I am not offended at you. Will you take a hand in the game we are about to play?"

"I will take a hand in the game you are going to play—by and by," answered the idiot with a strange emphasis, but seeing Alvarez's keen eyes fixed upon him he quickly drew forth a few cigarettes and tendered one to the villain.

"Smoke!" said he with an empty laugh.

"No!" replied Alvarez angrily as he rejoined his comrades at the table.

"Come! gentlemen, drink your wine, and then for a friendly game," called out Alvarez.

"You must excuse me, gents, for I wish to retire early. To-morrow evening I will be most happy to spend the whole evening with you all," and Richard arose from his seat. Quick as a flash of lightning Alvarez poured the contents of a small vial into Richard's glass and the colorless liquid mingled with the wine.

"I'm sorry you must leave so soon," said the scoundrel, apparently disappointed. "But if you must go, of course I will not press you to stay. Come! Empty your glasses, gentlemen."

The glasses were raised and as Richard placed the goblet to his lips the idiot darted to his side and dashed the goblet from the American's hand.

The shattered glass fell to the floor, while a curse fell from Alvarez's lips and he turned upon the idiot with rage beaming from his eyes.

The Mexicans sprung to their feet and their hands sought their concealed weapons.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY.

RICHARD DENVER sprung to his feet and his eyes met the stupid glance of the idiot. Jasper's hand rested upon a keen dagger and he partially withdrew it from its sheath.

"Curse you, what do you mean?" hissed Alvarez, advancing with a threatening motion toward the demented lad.

"Why didn't you give me the wine instead of spilling it on the floor?" cried the idiot in a whining voice and gazing with a meaningless expression, apparently unconscious of the enraged scoundrels who glared upon him.

"Don't mind him, sir," said Alvarez in apologetic tones to Richard. "He's insane and not responsible for his actions. Come, Mister Denver; allow me to fill a fresh glass for you."

The cunning villain placed a glass of wine before Richard. At that moment a warning motion from the idiot caught the eyes of the youth. Only a momentary gleam of intelligence passed over the lad's features and then the same blank expression settled upon his face.

Richard Denver was upon his guard and he partially saw through the idiot's motive.

"Come, sir! We are waiting for you," and Alvarez nervously noted the hesitating manner of the young American.

"Gentlemen, you must excuse me. I decline to drink!" said Richard, calmly and deliberately, but evincing no sign of distrust.

"Ha! ha! ha! do you think I would offer you poison?"

"It might be poison," drawled the idiot, and he broke into a hysterical laugh. As Richard turned, his eyes rested upon the features of Jasper for the first time, and he started back with surprise. Jasper's face and the voice of the landlord told the tale. He was in the den of his most bitter foes, and if he escaped it would be only by strategy or by a desperate struggle with the ruffians.

Jasper saw that Richard recognized him, and the scoundrel leaped to his feet. "Richard Denver, further concealment is useless. Look up! you are caged! You struck me once and I vowed vengeance for the blow. I am ready to keep my oath. You'll never leave this place alive."

Jasper drew the glittering stiletto from his belt and leaped toward Richard. Before the blade could descend upon the unprepared man a form bounded forward and seized the upraised hand of the ruffian. By a quick movement the knife was wrenched from Jasper's hand and the weapon was dashed to the floor.

"Curses on you! Out of my way, you imp of Satan!" yelled Jasper, as he thrust aside the idiot with an oath. At the same moment Alvarez bounded forward and struck Richard a blow upon the head with one of the heavy bottles. Without a groan the youth sunk to the floor while the blood streamed upon his pale features.

Instantly Sanchez and his companion seized the idiot and bore him to the floor. "Confine him in that room; it cannot be opened from the inside," yelled Jasper. The idiot was thrust into the panel and it closed with a sharp sound as of some secret spring closing violently. "Now then, the money—where is it?" said Jasper in a hoarse whisper as he bent over the senseless youth.

"The money is in his room above—in a small black valise. Here! bind him to this chair," and Alvarez spoke hastily and in hoarse tones.

"What do you intend to do?"

"Burn the old rookery and thus destroy all traces of the crime. The cash in the valise will amply repay us all."

A moment later and Richard's body was lying bound upon the chair while the Mexicans piled combustible material under the stairway.

"Quick! lose no time. The old shell will burn like tinder when it's started and we must secure the cash and escape," Alvarez struck a match and by aid of the alcoholic liquor he soon had the woodwork of the stairway in flames.

His companions applied a match to different portions of the room and a cloud of smoke filled the apartment. Flames leaped around the unconscious man, and the villains, assured of their work, beat a hasty retreat from the blazing apartment.

Nearer and nearer came the many tongues of flame, until they seemed about to envelop the doomed man in their merciless embrace; then a trap-door in the floor was suddenly thrust upward and Phelim McNamara emerged from the open space.

Through the smoke he dashed and reached the senseless form of the youth. He tore at the fastenings and released Richard. He dashed the cool wine into his face partially reviving him. The Irishman then leaped toward the secret panel and without difficulty found the knob and pressed upon it. The panel flew back and the idiot dashed out of the closet-like passage.

"Thank you, thank you," he whispered hastily. "Is Richard safe?"

"Deed he is! I'll not leave him until we're both roasted to a cinder together," cried Phelim. And running to Richard he seized him in his arms and bore him toward the trap-door.

"Can you use a pistol?" he asked.

"Yes! Give me one if you have one you can trust in my hands," answered the idiot, eagerly, and he darted toward Phelim to receive the weapon, but stopped suddenly.

With a cry of mingled fear and surprise, the

Irishman looked toward the blazing stairway. Through the lurid flames he saw the forms of the villains at the head of the stairs, and a shout from them told that they had discovered the attempted rescue. A bullet whizzed past Phelim's head, and a shout came from the villains above. The idiot raised the pistol that Phelim had placed in his grasp, and, taking hasty aim, fired.

A shrill cry of pain arose above the crackling of the fire, and then the body of a man fell down the burning stairway, and its weight crashed through the frail structure, and the entire mass came down.

A moment sooner, and the group of Mexicans on the landing above would have been swept down into the surging flames. Alvarez clung to the woodwork above, with one hand, while with his right he discharged his revolver at the dim outlines of the idiot and the Irishman, whom he could see bearing away the form of the young American. Even as he discovered the figures in the lurid light, the outlaw, known as Sanchez, clasped his hand to his left side and toppled backward.

The whiplike crack of a pistol came from the room below, and Alvarez ground his teeth with rage as he discovered that it was the idiot who had again fired.

"See! They are escaping by the trap into the underground passage! What fiend has discovered that secret? After them! We can yet cage them! Guard this door, some of you! They will either perish in the flames, or fall into our hands! Come, Jasper, follow me!" And the excited man rushed from the door, followed by several confederates.

Jasper followed after the bandits.

From every window the flames were seeking an outlet, and volumes of smoke curled around the doomed building, as if loth to abandon it to its fate.

Phelim lost no time in descending the trap, and bore Richard to the vault-like passage below the flooring, while the idiot, following, closed the heavy trap-door.

"Now then, follow me," cried Phelim. "We've got to get out of these rat-holes before they get to the end of 'em and block the passage. Come, Master Richard, try and walk a bit."

The damp air revived the young man and he mechanically followed his preserver. The idiot grasping the pistol followed close behind and ever and anon halted to see if they were not pursued. The long passage led in a winding manner and apparently into the very bowels of the earth.

"Do you know where this passage leads?" the idiot anxiously asked.

"Faith, I do! I explored it all before I came up! It's all right; follow me, but be as lively as a flea, the two of ye."

Phelim hurried along in the gloom—holding onto Richard's hand.

"Don't worry about the little black valise, Master Richard—I've got it safe and the black-faced baboons had their trouble for their pains. Begorra, they'll not catch Phelim McNamara asleep."

"And the boy—the idiot—where is he?" inquired Richard, as if awakening from a dream.

"Here!" responded a musical voice, and the lad found his way to Richard's side. The young man started; the voice was not that of the idiot, yet the demented lad was beside him.

A cloud seemed to be lifted from Richard's brain. "Do not deceive me any longer," said he. "In spite of your disguise and assumed voice I know you. You are Eldora!"

"Yes," confessed the tremulous voice. "It is Eldora!"

"Well! well! what next?" murmured Phelim.

"The fool turns out to be a girl! Begorra, the fool made a fool of the whole of us! But stop! No time for love-making or the likes of it. The first thing we know we'll know nothing."

Richard held the little hand of the girl within his own and sped away toward the exit of the tunnel.

"Found! found at last!" he whispered to her. "Never to lose you again!"

"Bedad! The double six is domino and the game is blocked!" roared the Irishman who was in advance and who leaped backward in alarm.

A flaming torch appeared directly in advance, and a dozen scowling faces were in the circle of flickering light.

Then came the ominous click of fire-arms and the gleam of polished steel. Eldora clung convulsively to the arm of the American.

The little group was trapped in the narrow tunnel and a barrier of deadly weapons cut off the only avenue of escape.

"Surrender, or we'll shoot you down like dogs!" shouted the harsh voice of Alvarez. He presented his weapon and aimed it at Richard.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PERILS OF A NIGHT.

PHELIM McNAMARA thrust his hand into his pocket and withdrew from it a formidable six-shooter.

"Begorra! I'm goin' to die like a jintleman, and me face to the inimy," he muttered.

The click, click, of the weapons in the hands of the bandits blocking up the only means of egress from the tunnel, aroused Richard. He realized that Eldora was clinging to him for protection. The thought put new life into every vein and muscle.

"Surrender!" again cried Alvarez, "or I die!"

A deafening explosion rung through the low tunnel, and a flash illuminated the dark passage momentarily.

"Take that and divide it amongst yees!" cried Phelim, as he again raised his smoking weapon.

A cry of mortal agony followed, and a form tattered and fell.

The bandits uttered a howl of rage, and their weapons were raised simultaneously.

"Down upon your faces to the ground!" shouted Phelim, seizing Richard's arm.

And down they all dropped to the ground, as a blinding flash was followed by a shower of missiles that passed harmlessly over the prostrate forms.

The torch was suddenly extinguished, and a figure leaped among the group of bandits dealing death and destruction at every crack of the barrel of pistols it flourished. Down went the surprised ruffians before the attack of the unknown rescuer. Jasper sought the shelter of the chaparral, and Alvarez fled into the gloom.

"This way! Quick!" cried the unknown. "Not a moment's to be lost if you would escape with your lives!"

Richard and Eldora sprung toward the exit and passed out into the starless night. A quarter of a mile away the burning building reddened the sky with its glare.

A masked figure, enveloped in a long cloak, stood near the opening of the passage, and extending his hand toward the dense growth of trees, exclaimed:

"Take her; guard her well. You will find fast horses in the chaparral. Go! I will cover your retreat!"

A shrill whistle rung through the still night air. The bandits were signaling to their confederates.

"Fly! Not a moment to spare!" cried the unknown, as he moved away in the direction of the signals.

Richard plunged into the chaparral, closely followed by Eldora and Phelim.

Several quick cries and the crack of firearms—then the hurried tramp of many feet. The bandits were in rapid pursuit.

Richard scarcely knew what direction to pursue, for the gloom was intense and the locality unknown to him. Yet he fled, but suddenly passed, for dark objects moved directly in advance.

"Surrounded!" said Richard, despondingly, and passing an arm around Eldora he prepared to meet the ruffians.

Phelim cocked his ponderous "pepper-box" and for a moment hesitated in what direction to fire.

The neigh of a horse startled the Irishman and forced a glad cry from his lips, and he exclaimed:—"There's the horses, master Richard!"

The dark moving forms in the shrubbery were the expected horses! The trio rushed eagerly forward to find two stout mustangs secured to the low branches of a tree. It was but the work of a moment to unfasten them. Richard mounted and bending downward raised Eldora to the pommel before him. Too late! A bandit sprung forward and seized the bride!

"Dismount or die!" he yelled in a hoarse voice.

The words were his last for the Irishman's pistol exploded, and the ruffian sunk under the horse's hoofs with a low groan. Then they sped over the prostrate bandit, Phelim's musket crushing another ruffian who sprung upward to check the steeds.

A murderous volley of bullets cut the foliage between the heads of the fugitives and added to

the speed of the mustangs. The bandits came on in pursuit, their loud curses adding to the wild scene.

The mustangs seemed to know what was required of them, for the intelligent brutes picked their way through the intricate windings of the forest and sped away again when the nature of the ground permitted a rapid flight.

Richard crouched low in the saddle to avoid the sweeping boughs and stout limbs of the trees. Eldora's head rested upon his shoulder and her shrinking form told of the suspense under which she labored. The cries of the pursuers sounded at times quite near and then again the shouts would die away altogether, as if the bandits had lost the trail and had abandoned the chase.

Phelim's mustang showed no signs of fatigue, but the one that bore the double burden began slowly to labor and pant in order to keep up with the other animal.

"This horse cannot last much longer," said Richard. "See! he stumbles!" Even as he spoke, the beast shivered and vainly endeavored to move forward.

It trembled in every limb and then with a snort of anguish sunk down upon its knees and fell upon its side. It then was seen that the poor beast had received a wound.

As it fell he leaped to the ground, bearing Eldora with him.

"Here, master Richard! Take my horse and away wid you!" cried Phelim, leaping from his mustang, and the noble fellow almost forced the youth into the vacant saddle.

"And you? Phelim, I cannot allow this sacrifice. Go! save yourself, my good fellow. Do not delay, for see! the rascals are at hand."

"Divil a fut will I stir. I'll be murdered 'pon the spot. I'll not run away and I've you and the lady to be kilt by the Greasers."

"For Heaven's sake go, while yet you may!" cried Richard, entreatingly.

"No, sir! Me mind's made up! I'll not go. Take my horse and you and the young lady ride away. Quick or it will be too late!"

A pistol cracked from the copse and the voice of the ruffian Jasper followed.

The bullet cut the air close to the young American's head.

"Take the horse and save the young lady!" cried Phelim in a voice tremulous with excitement. "Don't mind me, master Richard; I'll look to my own safety!"

In an instant Richard was in the saddle and Eldora was in his arms.

"Good-by, Phelim! God bless you!" he murmured, and, as the shouts of the bandits rung in his ears, the mustang leaped forward.

"Saints protect you!" yelled Phelim. "Take that, ye dirty vagabond," he added as he turned quickly and struck the nearest bandit a terrific blow full in the face.

In a moment the brave fellow was surrounded by the fierce Mexicans and a dozen weapons were aimed at his head.

In spite of the fearful odds Phelim did not cease his struggles until his hands and feet were secured by leathern thongs.

"I'm willing to let yez have me," he cried, "for master Richard's safe out of yer claws and it's small loss if Phelim McNamara never gits back to the States again!"

"After the American dog!" yelled Jasper as he dashed up. "Secure the American and the lad! A thousand dollars for either of them, dead or alive! The captain promises the reward, remember, dead or alive!"

A dozen men dashed away, bent upon securing the promised reward.

Richard's mustang went forward at a rapid gait. A faint light struggled through the chaparral and the gloom gradually lifted. The moon was forcing her way through rifts in the clouds that hung low in the horizon. The way became difficult, for boulders and masses of earth and rock arose, barrier-like, to impede the progress of the panting steed.

The pathway grew steep, and all vegetation vanished; nothing greeted the eyes of the fugitives but huge, fantastic boulders thrown by some mighty convulsion into the center of this desolate region.

The steed struggled hard to obtain a footing upon the rugged surface of the steep rock, one side of which was in complete darkness, and appeared to be a yawning gulf. One false step would precipitate both the steed and its burden into the black abyss.

Hark! what was that? The sharp crack of a rifle and the startling command to halt!

Richard uttered a cry of surprise as he reined in the mustang. At its feet yawned a deep black precipice.

CHAPTER VII.

OLD COMRADES FORM A NEW COMPACT.

ALVAREZ did not follow after the fugitives when they fled from the tunnel.

Coward-like he contented himself with urging on his followers and firing harmless shots at the disappearing fugitives.

He believed that his confederate Jasper would secure the American and his two companions.

As the shouts of pursuit died away the villain muttered:

"Confound this night's work! There's the building gone and nothing to show for it. I expected the gold in the American's valise would well repay me for the loss of the old rookery, but it seems as if Satan aided the fellow; the valise was gone and the thousands that I expected to handle are not to be found. To make matters worse he has escaped. Who was the idiot lad? A trick—a clever one—but who was he? And who was the unknown that delivered the three when I had them caged?"

Alvarez forced his way through the damp vegetation and failed to notice the shadowy form that glided after him, paused when he paused, and occasionally seemed to sink into the very earth to avoid the villain's backward glances.

Finally Alvarez halted in a clump of trees that encompassed a deep pool of water.

Several trees grew close together, and stepping into their midst he knelt down and raised a trap-door whose surface was cunningly covered with moss and earth. An opening lay revealed, and he glanced about to assure himself that no one was in the vicinity. Having satisfied himself that he was alone and unobserved he descended into the narrow aperture and cautiously closed the trap after him.

A moment later the shadowy figure crept to the clump of trees and paused.

"So! villain! murderer! you burrow into the very earth for security, do you?" said the cloaked figure. "To-night you would have added another crime to your long list of atrocities, but the arm of the avenger interposed. Beware, blood-stained monster, for your career is almost at an end!"

Silently the figure moved within the trees, and found the iron ring fastened to the trap, and raised it.

The entrance was exposed to view, and the cloaked figure producing a weapon, slowly and carefully descended, closing the trap without noise.

He found himself within a rough, damp passage, cut through the soil.

He moved along cautiously, groping his way, his ears alive to the slightest sound, and his hand ready to grasp the hilt of a double-edged poniard.

He had gone probably forty yards, when he suddenly halted.

A faint light came through the gloom, and the low hum of voices reached his ears. Silently the phantom-like figure stole forward, and paused at a rough door imbedded in the earthen side of the passage.

Through several rifts in the rough door came the faint light that had attracted the unknown's attention.

He approached the door, and applying an eye to a small aperture he was enabled to view the scene beyond the wooden barrier. A tallow candle shed an uncertain light, and afforded the watcher an opportunity of hastily scanning the underground apartment and its occupants.

Rough boards and logs prevented the crumbling earth from caving in, and held the roof of the chamber in position.

The secret retreat was quite roomy, and various large boxes and pieces of machinery lay in a confused mass at one end of the room.

A table, formed of a barrel, upon which a short plank was laid, occupied the center of the chamber, and, seated beside it, with the spluttering candle between them, was Alvarez, and a villainous looking personage attired in the costume of a Mexican guerrilla.

Every word uttered by this pair of scoundrels could be distinctly heard by the mysterious spy who peered through the door, standing immovable as a statue, and as silent as death.

"You say that the American eluded you?" said the powerful fellow opposite Alvarez.

"Yes, with him goes a good sum of money. I owe the fellow a debt of vengeance, and I wished to pay everything at one fell swoop, but it seems fate was against me. Even our coining of American dollars is a thing of the past, or will be; these confounded Yankee detectives are up to everything, it seems, and they've destroyed or captured the best members of the fraternity, either upon the Texan borders or

the Gulf States. My latest venture was the purchase of arms for the revolutionists, and I was forced to blow up the vessel to avoid capture by a Mexican corvette," and a fierce oath broke from Alvarez's lips as the magnitude of his loss seemed to suddenly dawn upon him.

"Then my chances of obtaining money are rather slim?"

"Well, yes; at present I can't place any amount in your hands."

"Look ye, Alvarez, it won't do to trifle with me," said the guerrilla. "You have reaped a rich harvest, and enjoy its benefits. I have received dribbets now and then, but not the equal share you promised me!"

Alvarez turned pale, for he knew the temper of the man. He attempted to speak, but the guerrilla motioned to him to be silent.

"Wait until I have concluded," said he. "Remember that I placed the child upon the strange vessel and sent her forever out of your path. True 'twas your hand that struck that deadly blow but I secured the documents and concealed them for you. Fool that I was to place them in your hands! I might have retained them and compelled you to come to my terms. One thing more, Alvarez: the estates can be claimed by you without trouble, for the man you murdered was hunted by the Government as a traitor and would doubtless have been hanged, so you might have spared his life and surrendered him to the minions of Escobedo. The child is dead and you and I are left alone to share this wealth."

"Gomez! The child lives!"

The villain started from his seat and glared upon Alvarez like a wild beast.

"I believe you are lying to me, but remember the old saying 'when thieves fall out honest men get their dues.'"

"I am speaking the truth; I am telling you what I have seen with my own eyes—the child lives!"

"Where have you seen her?"

"Under very strange circumstances. She was a stowaway upon my own vessel—a spy in the interest of the revolutionists—or the government I do not know which. By accident I overheard the story she related to the young American who shielded her from us. She described the assassin and said she could identify him."

"Identify him? How?"

"By the branded hand!" and Alvarez, slowly and with a ferocious look upon his features, held up his hand.

Seared in the flesh of his left hand was the letter A, in the very palm, and looking as if the mark had been imprinted but yesterday.

"The letter A—prominent and lasting!" cried Gomez; "I never saw it before."

"No; because I keep it well out of sight. Curse the law that authorized the mark, and may Satan crush the one that fixed that brand upon me. I feel that it will one day be the means of dragging me before a tribunal or point to me as the murderer of one that trusted me. Oh! for some acid, some chemical that would wipe away this accursed mark even though my hand withered! I have often thought of doing so, but a reassuring feeling would cause me to dispel these violent remedies," and Alvarez dashed the hand upon the frail table almost extinguishing the candle and plunging the apartment in gloom.

The listening figure started nervously when beholding the singular mark upon Alvarez's hand and hearing the words that fell from the villain's lips.

"Enough of your troubles!" said Gomez. "I want to know what proof you have that the child lives and has grown up to womanhood?"

"The story she told Richard Denver, and her features are the only proof! Stay! another proof. Fool that I was. Blind fool! This very night she was in my power, and I knew her not! As the idiot boy she gained access to our secret room and foiled me in several schemes. Blind fool that I was, I could not recognize the face and voice then, but I see it all now and curse myself for my stupidity."

"So the girl lives and you saw her to-night?" demanded Gomez, incredulously.

"Yes, I swear it," responded Alvarez, calmly.

"Thank God! she lives," murmured the cloaked listener at the door, and a subdued prayer lingered upon his lips.

"Do you mean to say that, because the girl lives, my interest in the share of the estates is at an end?" asked Gomez, fixing his eyes upon the features of his associate in crime.

"Well—no; but I think you ought to carry out your share of the work. The compact be-

tween us was to the effect that the child be destroyed or forever removed. Your part of the work, you see, is a failure!"

"Very well! She shall be removed, if that is the only obstacle to the money. And remember, when I bring you sufficient proof that she is dead, I want you to claim the estates at once and share all with me immediately."

"It shall be done! But remember, Gomez, the American will prove a stumbling-block in your path. My men are now in pursuit and may overhaul the fellow and even bring the girl also!"

"In that case our compact must hold good also. No matter by what means she is destroyed or by whom—our arrangements must not be altered. The American will never leave Mexico alive. I will set my mountain rangers after him and they'll track him like bloodhounds, you can depend upon it," and Gomez chuckled savagely over his suggestion.

"But what of Jasper? He expects a share and he is working like a beaver to retake the American and capture his confederate," Alvarez answered.

"Jasper? Well, let him work and when he has accomplished the work and demands his pay, I'll settle with him," and the guerrilla chief made a motion across his throat with his forefinger and adding: "We can't afford to share with a third party."

A slight sound reached the ears of the villain Alvarez. The sound came from the passage.

Slight as it had been, the rascal had heard it, and comprehended that an eavesdropper lurked beyond the door.

CHAPTER VIII.

STEFANO, THE DEFORMED DWARF.

ALVAREZ, standing partially erect, one hand leaning upon the rude table, the other grasping a revolver, presented a weird picture with the wavering light of the candle falling upon his features and adding to their ferocity.

The wild aspect of the underground chamber formed a rude background for the animated tableau.

The bandit's shadow cast upon the wall of the subterranean retreat assumed gigantic proportions as he bent forward to listen.

Without a word he stepped quickly to the side of the room and his hand appeared to press upon some hidden object among the planks forming the support to the roof.

Instantly following the bandit's action the ground seemed to open beneath the unknown's feet and he was precipitated into space, wildly clutching at the sides of the pit as he shot downward. The trap reclosed after the cloaked figure had fallen through.

Alvarez bounded to the door and flung it open. Candle in hand he peered down upon the earth and the trap before the door.

An exclamation of mingled surprise and satisfaction fell from his lips as he beheld the mark of footprints in the soft earth and the loose particles of soil adhering to the planks forming the trap-door.

Gomez came to the door and both rascals gazed upon the spot where, a few moments before, a human being had trod the treacherous covering of the pit.

"See? I was right! There was some one listening to our conversation. Whoever it is found a speedy death. I work upon the principle that dead men tell no tales," and Alvarez gave a satisfied grunt.

"And so do I. I've always found it the safest way to keep secrets from spreading," replied Gomez significantly.

"Who do you think it was?"

"I can't say," replied Gomez. "No one entered this room by the passage I used. Whoever it was, followed and descended the entrance that you used to-night. I would like to know who it is and why we were tracked!"

"I can easily find out who it is by sending the dwarf Stefano to the bottom of the pit," cried Alvarez.

"How deep is it?" asked Gomez.

"Over thirty feet," replied Alvarez, "and it can be entered from the next room by descending a series of winding tunnels to that depth. This trap was constructed in the palmiest days of our order. I saw one just like it in an old castle in Spain and I obtained a sketch of its workings and a skillful workman built it. It was convenient in more ways than one. In case of a surprise, those standing upon the trap could be hurled into the pit by merely pressing the hidden knob. Again, we could destroy any member whom the order had sentenced by allowing them to come to the door, and while waiting to be admitted they were suddenly

launched into eternity. Nine times out of ten the fall resulted in instant death, but should it not be fatal Stefano would complete the work with his iron pike."

"You protect your underground den with secrets worthy of the days of the Inquisition," said Gomez with a grim smile; "but now to business. Let us understand each other distinctly: I am to rid you of the girl and instantly share the property; is that the compact?"

"Yes; here's my hand upon it."

And the two scoundrels clasped hands to seal the compact.

A few moments later Gomez returned into the dismal chamber, followed by Alvarez.

The guerrilla approached a corner of the apartment and bending down he forced open a few planks in the wall disclosing a low dark entrance.

"See! I use this passage at all times," said he. "Now you can call Stefano and have him enlighten you. I'll bid you good-by for the present and begin the search at once. Remember, Alvarez, twelve years is a long time to wait for a fortune, and there is such a thing as growing tired and impatient."

Gomez stooped down and entered the passage and his retreating footsteps grew faint in the gloom of the tunnel.

Alvarez closed the orifice and returned to the table. His brows were knitted and the veins upon his forehead stood out like cords.

"You'll wait a mighty long time to get your share, I can tell you," muttered he, shaking his clenched fist toward the hidden passage. "Removing the girl from my path is well enough, for it saves me trouble, but obtaining a share of the estate is something I will not hear to. When I've got through with your service, friend Gomez, I will rid myself of you—easily and systematically. Ha! ha! ha!"

Alvarez laughed, but his voice sounded so strange and hollow in that ghostly place that the arch-villain quickly checked his mirth and gave several quick, searching glances about the apartment to see if some shape had not arisen to echo his horrible mirth. He secured the door and sat down beside the improvised table, and drew the candle nearer to him.

"Strange that I was followed to this place. I'd give most anything to know who it was. I can't believe that the person dogged my footsteps to-night. No; some one has been lurking in these passages and accidentally paused at that door to observe and listen. Whoever it is will never blab the secret to any one, for his mangled body lies at the bottom of the pit, and there is no escape from that terrible place; I've provided against all that. When once you are there you stay until doomsday, unless Stefano should open his heart and extend pity, and that is something the dwarf never knew. No, no; whoever you are now at the bottom of that pit, you'll never see daylight again!"

Alvarez drew from an inner pocket a package wrapped in a piece of oiled muslin and carefully removed the outer covering. From another wrapper of the same material he drew forth a soiled and somewhat old-looking package of documents, some written upon heavy paper, but the greater part were on parchment.

He selected one with several broad seals affixed to the lower edge and his eyes perused the writing.

It was the last will of Don Francisco De Vega, specifying the conditions and appointing Alvarez the guardian of his only child, Eldora De Vega.

Alvarez held the last testament of the man he had murdered, and again read the instrument carefully, and then folding it up replaced it among the mass of papers.

He secured the package and thrust it into his pocket.

"My way is clear," said he, musingly. "The only obstacle that I see is the girl. Even she is not to be feared if the present government can hold its sway. In this blessed land of sudden changes it does not behoove a man to pledge his life and fortune to any faction. One day up, next day down; that's the fate of our Mexican parties. Now should this new faction prove successful I should be swamped, for Don De Vega was an influential leader of the party and his daughter could obtain her estates and my speedy execution. My interests demand the stability and success of the present regime, and my outlaw band must draw swords in its favor. Stay! A most brilliant idea suggests itself: why do I not seek the girl, boldly carry her off, or declare my love for her? Once she is my wife, who will dare dispute my claim? Who will point to me as the murderer of De Vega? Gomez! Yes; he alone. But I can easily rid myself of him. Would that I could rid myself

of this cursed branded hand as easily," and Alvarez bowed his head as if in deep meditation. "I'll do it," said he, musingly. "There is a difference in our ages, of course, but what does it matter? I will compel her to become mine and then, let come what may, I am doubly sure of the fortune."

A gleam of satisfaction lit up his satanic features and he arose from the rude table.

"Stefano! Stefano!" he called.

The opening in the wall was disclosed and a hideous object forced a passage through the narrow aperture. A head covered with hair resembling the wool of a buffalo rested upon a diminutive body. A pair of ogreish eyes that rolled in their sockets, lent a wild appearance to the brutish features of the deformed dwarf.

A row of gleaming teeth that protruded over huge lips and prevented the mouth from closing, gave the strange being a wolfish and repulsive appearance. The hands and feet resembled the claws of a baboon.

A coarse shirt and leggings of the same material formed its costume.

It presented a most repulsive aspect as it leaned upon a short iron spade and awaited the commands of the villain seated at the table.

The weird light of the candle only served to represent the dwarf as a demon suddenly loosed from below to answer the summons of the blood-stained rascal.

"Is it you, Stefano?" called out Alvarez, shrinking away as if he dared not trust his eyesight, and the nondescript before him was a visitor from Hades.

"Yes, master!" returned the dwarf, with a hideous leer, disclosing the long fangs and the capacious mouth.

"Stefano, I've had a visitor."

"Yes, master!"

"I do not mean Gomez."

"No, master; not Gomez," echoed the horrible creature with a low chuckle. "Some one else, master?"

"Yes, and I do not know who it was."

"Where is he, master?"

"I touched the spring and sent him down into the pit!"

"Into the pit, master? Then there is work for Stefano," said the dwarf with seeming glee.

"I think he is dead! Stefano, you will descend into the pit and take a light with you; hold it close to the man's face; I will look through the trap and thus see who the person was that listened at that door!"

"Why don't you come down into the pit, master? Don't be afraid of it—you built it, master!" and the creature horribly smiled.

"Yes, but I have a strange presentiment that I may have built it for my own tomb. I'd rather remain up here and glance through the open trap! Go!" and Alvarez motioned the dwarf away.

The hideous creature disappeared in the niche in the wall.

"Heaven help the wretch in that pit if life is not yet extinct!" murmured Alvarez.

CHAPTER IX.

A MYSTERIOUS DELIVERANCE.

WHEN Richard reined in his mustang as he saw the fearful precipice, he could not repress a sharp cry of alarm. Eldora clung to him, but smothered the scream on her lips—now bloodless and quivering with terror.

From crag to crag leaped the wild echoes of the fire-arms, and the cries of the bandits who, now certain of their prisoners, bounded forward with fierce cries of exultation.

One final effort on the part of the frightened mustang to prevent himself from being swept over with the crumbling earth, and the poor beast uttered a piercing cry of anguish and shot forward over the treacherous brink, carrying his burden in the plunge down into the unknown depths of the abyss.

A wailing cry arose from the two human beings clinging to the steed; and then the frightened faces of the bandits peered over the brink in an unsuccessful attempt to note the depth of the chasm, or hear aught of the fugitives in their terrific descent. The moon failed to illumine the dark gulf, even half-way to its rocky depth.

Baffled and disappointed the ruffians withdrew from the crumbling edges of the chasm and departed toward the glen to rejoin their comrades and acquaint them with the startling denouement of the pursuit.

As Richard felt himself whirling through space, he grasped Eldora to his breast, and

clutched the shaggy mane of the mustang to retain a firm position upon its back.

Down—down through the murky darkness, not knowing at what moment the horrible death that must ensue, would put an end to the suspense worse than the death itself. A thousand thoughts seemed to chase each other through Richard's brain, within the very few seconds that must have elapsed since taking the awful plunge. Then followed a shock. A thousand lights seemed to flash before his eyes and rapidly fade away again. A hushed silence followed and everything was as silent as the grave.

His senses were leaving him.

Then followed a blank!

When Richard again opened his eyes, he saw the dim outline of a form bending over him, and he felt a cooling fluid laving his temples and forehead.

He closed his eyes for a few moments, and the startling scene of the precipice and the fall came vividly to his mind. Slowly he opened his eyes again, and the light of day greeted his vision. Next he observed the face peering anxiously into his own, and noted the signs of joy that swept over it as its owner beheld his return to consciousness.

It was Eldora!

"Spared from the terrible abyss!" he murmured. "Thank Heaven! We are not yet deserted by the Great Ruler, who notes even the fall of the sparrow."

It was indeed Eldora who was laving his temples with the cool water that trickled down through the massive walls beside her.

Both Richard and the noble girl were upon a narrow ledge, whose surface was covered with a thick, green moss, and the innumerable leaves and twigs that had fallen from above, the entire mass of vegetation forming a thick, but yielding carpet.

Below—as far as the eye could penetrate—was the jagged opening of the chasm stretching away into a deep gloom. A bottomless pit, that might well characterize the mouth of the infernal regions.

In fact, the spot was known to the guerrillas and the wild rovers of the mountains as the "Casa di diavolo" (Satan's Home).

The term was well applied and the spot shunned by night or day.

Above the ledge where Richard and Eldora found themselves, the towering rocks and stunted trees seemed to stretch upward until they touched the sky.

Innumerable tufts of vegetation grew between the crevices of the rocks, and gnarled trees—vainly striving to fasten their roots in the thin layer of soil—covered the almost perpendicular side of the precipice.

Above the ledge, these were the only signs of vegetable life. Below, nothing but the deep gloom and the deathlike stillness.

Richard turned his eyes toward Eldora. The girl was upon her knees and her lips moved in prayer.

A prayer to the All-Seeing, who had stretched forth His hand and plucked them out of the very jaws of death.

It was a most miraculous escape, and one well calculated to bring them to the foot of God's throne with their heartfelt thanks.

"Eldora!"

"Yes, Richard!"

"We are safe! This is no dream! Do I behold you alive?"

"Yes, Richard. God has interposed and spared us," replied the girl, devotedly.

Richard crept to the verge of the ledge and glanced down. His heart sunk within him and his cheeks grew still paler as he noted the fearful depth and realized the hair-breadth escape they had experienced.

"And the mustang?" he feebly asked.

"The poor beast struck upon this ledge in such a manner that we were hurled upon it and thrown close to the wall. The mustang rolled over into the awful pit below."

And Eldora shrunk away from the edge of the shelving rock with a shudder, not daring to peer over the verge.

"You say the mustang rolled from the edge into the black space below?"

"Yes," replied Eldora, "for I did not lose consciousness. You struck in such a manner that you were senseless almost as soon as you were freed from the saddle. Throughout the long dreary night I watched beside your lifeless form, praying for the coming day. I could feel the feeble throbbing of your heart and knew that life still remained. At early dawn I discovered the tiny stream of cold water that revived you."

"Eldora, you are an angel and I love you,"

said Richard impetuously, and before he could realize what he was saying or doing, he had caught the beautiful girl in his arms and pressed his lips to hers, in the first kiss of a love pure and holy as that of the mother for her babe.

In the presence of the Supreme Ruler, and midst the awful desolation surrounding them, the young couple exchanged their first words of love.

An hour passed and yet neither realized the position in which they were.

"Eldora, I have gained your love only to lose you again! See! there is no way of reaching the high above, and to attempt a descent is sure death. We are spared from a violent death only to meet a lingering one of tortures—the tortures of starvation. We are unable to quit this ledge, and here we must remain until the dark angel of death puts an end to our sufferings! Oh! Eldora, I have won you, only to lose you in this world!"

And Richard took the little white hands within his own and stood silently gazing into the eyes of the girl, with a look of mute despair. Despair because he had carefully observed the situation above and below and saw no hope of leaving the ledge. Even the frail tufts of vegetation were beyond his reach—ay, many yards beyond his reach—and as the breeze swayed them to and fro they seemed to mock him and defy him to grasp them.

Behind them was the massive buttress—layer upon layer—reaching upward like an endless wall.

The sun shone down upon the ledge, beating upon the bare heads of the young couple as if it was in league with the elements to destroy the fugitives. It was a strange picture to see the tall figure of the young American, with calm features, awaiting the hour of dissolution, and the little figure clad in the Mexican garb of a peasant boy, standing beside him, watching every moment, every expression of the handsome, manly features of his lover.

"All hope is gone," murmured Richard. "I see no avenue of escape. I have glanced everywhere and my heart fails me. No one can save or help us," said he, despondingly.

"Yes, Richard, there is One who can and will save us," and the girl pointed toward the blue heavens far above. "God! Put your trust in Him and He will not forsake us!"

"I do. Heaven forgive me for doubting as I did. God will help us!"

"And He sent me to your assistance!"

A deep voice sounded behind the young couple and they turned quickly with looks of speechless surprise upon their countenances.

A large boulder had turned seemingly upon a pivot, disclosing an aperture in the face of the rocky wall.

Before the opening, motionless as a statue, stood a remarkable form.

It was that of an aged man, whose long white hair mingled with the flowing patriarchal beard that reached almost to his girdle.

He wore a coarse brown robe and rough wooden sandals were upon his feet.

He grasped a tall staff with his right hand.

Upon the apex of the staff writhed and coiled a live serpent, whose eyes flashed, and whose forked tongue darted rapidly in and out of its distended jaws.

"He sends me to your assistance!" repeated the voice, and the strange being advanced a step toward the couple. "Fear not," said he, "I am not a spirit of evil. I will do you no harm. On the contrary I could leave you here to perish, but Heaven has sent you to me. I have waited so long—so long!"

The man spoke in tones so sorrowful that Eldora felt as if the words were addressed to her, and her heart beat with a strange and unaccountable emotion.

She drew still nearer to Richard as if in dread of the odd personage before her. A look of anguish seemed to steal over those furrowed features, and in a whisper he said:

"She shrinks away from me!" and then in a louder tone, "perhaps she is alarmed on account of the serpent?"

He made a motion with his left hand; the snake unwound itself from the staff, glided down upon the old man's shoulder and passed along his arm, twining its scaly body around it and raising its vicious head to peer at the young couple with its gleaming eyes.

"Come! Enter the abode that for years and years no human feet but mine own have ever traversed. Come!" and the strange figure led the way through the opening, remaining behind to close the aperture. Suddenly he sunk upon his knees and murmured, "God, I thank thee for answering my prayer!"

CHAPTER X.

THE MAN OF MYSTERY AGAIN.

When the unknown fell through the trap he shot downward with great velocity and made a frantic but unavailing effort to clutch the sides of the pit.

He heard the trap-door spring to again, and with a prayer upon his lips, he resigned himself to his fate.

From the sides of the pit excavated in the ground, there grew at intervals the great snake-like roots of huge trees towering far above the earth's surface, and whose roots grew down and projected through the wall of the pit—seeming not unlike serpents protruding from their den.

In these the victim's long cloak became so entangled as to partially break the fall, and the unknown instead of lying at the bottom of the pit a crushed and lifeless mass of humanity, merely was momentarily stunned.

A most sickening smell—of the tomb or the charnel-house pervaded the pit. His sense of touch told him that a mass of bones and decayed animal matter lay beneath and around him.

A slight noise caused him to look upward, and far above he saw a star-like gleam appear in the darkness. The light became stronger, and the unknown was enabled to see that the trap-door had been opened and that a man's face was peering down through the opening. It was Alvarez who was thus striving to discover the whereabouts of his victim and awaiting the entrance of the dwarf in order that he might expose the features of the person at the bottom of the awful pit.

The spot where the unknown lay was plunged in profound gloom, therefore Alvarez could not even discern the form of his victim, who was suddenly startled by a muffled foot-fall that came faintly to his ears, apparently from the earth behind him. Some one was coming, perhaps to finish the work that the fall had failed to accomplish, or perhaps the object of the person's coming was robbery.

These thoughts flashed into the victim's mind as he crouched in the gloom listening to the approaching footsteps.

A faint streak of light appeared in the side of the pit, thus revealing the exact quarter of the approaching footsteps, and the position of the door or aperture leading into the cavity.

Whoever it was, his intentions were evil. So reasoned the crouching figure, and he prepared to sell his life dearly.

His heavy revolver yet remained in its place within his belt.

With an exclamation of joy he grasped the weapon and drew back into the shadows, close beside the streak of light in the wall. The small iron door moved. It opened, and a broad glare of light from a dark lantern flashed into the pit. The next moment the face of the hideous dwarf appeared at the opening.

Carefully the ghoulish creature descended, holding aloft the lantern with his left hand and grasping the murderous iron spade with his right.

He failed to note the figure standing close beside the damp wall.

The dwarf stooped down to examine the flooring of the pit and a cry of surprise broke from his lips as he saw not the mangled form of him whom he expected to find crushed and bleeding among the putrid and decayed mass forming the bottom of the pit. There was a swift rush and a dull thud as the unknown struck the deformed creature a tremendous blow upon his shaggy head.

The blow felled the dwarf, and he dropped his lantern and spade to the floor, uttering a cry resembling that of a wild animal wounded to the death, as he sunk upon the repulsive mass littering the place.

Only a moment to note the position of the aperture and then the masked figure seized the lantern and crawled through the low doorway, making his way rapidly through the winding tunnel.

Alvarez closed the trap with a howl of rage, and dashed into the low room with the intention of intercepting the mysterious person who had lived through the terrible fall.

"Man or demon! he must not escape me," he shouted. "Can it be possible that a human being can live after such a fall? This knife will test whether he is invulnerable to steel."

Alvarez stooped down and dashed through the opening, taking the same direction that Stefano had followed, in order to descend the zigzag course of the passage leading down to the pit.

"Curses on my blind haste! I have forgotten to bring the candle," he muttered, as he sped along in the dark.

He expected to see the flashing rays of the

fugitive's lantern, but he was doomed to disappointment.

The unknown, hearing the approach of the villain, closed the lantern and drew back into a dark corner before the approaching bandit could obtain a glimpse of its light.

A second later and Alvarez was directly opposite the figure—and almost touched it with his elbow. He had not gone a foot further when he received a crushing blow that sent him reeling to the ground—prostrate upon his face and oblivious to the surroundings.

"Dog! I ought to kill you!" muttered the unknown as he bent over the senseless villain and opened the lantern's side allowing the rays to fall upon the apparently dead body of Alvarez. "I ought to kill you, but I will spare you for the present. Your time has not yet arrived. But beware! for I am constantly on your track."

The masked man spurned the prostrate body with his foot and strode away in the passage.

He soon reached the low chamber where Alvarez's candle was just casting its expiring rays upon the objects in the apartment.

The strange adventurer did not pause an instant in this room but passed through the door, which had served him as a place of observation only a short time previous. He passed over the treacherous trap that had launched him into the pit and then hurried along toward the exit.

He reached the rough steps leading to the doorway in the midst of the trees—and raising it, he passed out into the shadow of the clump. He closed the trap and stood for a moment as if to rest from the exertion.

He was gradually growing fainter, and now that he had escaped the terrible fate he seemed to realize its magnitude and his limbs almost refused to bear him.

"Courage!" he murmured. "Only a few hundred feet into yonder chaparral and I will find my trusty steed. Heaven be praised for according me its timely assistance! I still live—live to accomplish the one object I hold most dear to my heart. Vengeance! vengeance!"

He entered the thick growth of bushes and cacti, and was soon in a small grove of trees crowning the verge of a steep hill. Among these trees he paused and placing a silver whistle to his lips he blew a soft but peculiar blast upon it.

A horse, bridled and saddled, arose from the tangled vines, and came forward to greet the man of mystery. A second later he was in the saddle, and the steed bore him away at a rapid gait.

Even while the unknown galloped away from the locality, the repulsive looking dwarf made a few movements of returning consciousness and struggled to his feet.

His eyes failed to pierce the gloom although the deformed creature glanced in all directions, as if to assure himself of his whereabouts. He searched upon the floor with his talon-like fingers until they grasped his beloved spade.

He pressed it to his bosom as if he had found a bag of treasures.

Searching his pockets he found a few matches and ignited one upon the hard surface of his spade.

By aid of this feeble light he passed through the open cavity in the damp wall of the pit, and shuffled onward through the low passage.

He muttered to himself and re-lit fresh matches as if dreading to pursue his way in the dark.

He seemed a veritable creature of the underground regions—his terrible shadow dancing upon the wall, like a "will-o'-the-wisp," leading him onward, and his eyes gleaming in the uncertain glare of the burning match as if they were coals of fire.

Suddenly the dwarf paused, and he dropped the smoldering match to the earth.

Upon the damp clay, directly in the center of the passage, was a form—the form of a man now attempting to raise himself.

With a fearful yell Stefano darted forward, and raised the terrible spade.

"Stefano!" said a well-known voice.

"Yes, master!"

The dwarf allowed the spade to descend to his side, and he leaned over the bleeding villain and helped him to his feet.

"You spoke in time, master; I was going to kill you," said the dwarf. "My eyes were blinded with blood, and I saw nothing but revenge—nothing but revenge!"

"How did you enter that pit, without seeing that the man at the bottom of it was alive and prepared for you?" demanded Alvarez.

"I did not think to find him alive, master!"

That was no creature of flesh and blood. No! it was a spirit! It struck me with its hand. See! even my shaggy head did not protect me from its wrath."

"Spirit? Bah! It was a foe—a human foe—one most to be feared. Why did you not try to kill him?" cried Alvarez, vehemently.

"Why didn't you kill him, master?" responded the dwarf, humbly.

Alvarez could not reply. He had fallen by the same hand, and even when he felt sure of confronting the man of mystery in the dark passage, and easily disposing of him with his dagger.

He spoke not a word, but slowly made his way back toward the room where the candle, burning feebly in its socket, threatened each moment to leave the chamber in deepest darkness.

The dwarf followed at his heels, rubbing his hands with glee. Now and then, with a malicious leer, he would exclaim:

"Why didn't you kill him, master?"

CHAPTER XI.

FACE TO FACE WITH HIS FOE.

RICHARD found himself in a chamber, hollowed out by Nature in the very heart of the mountain. Far above was the roof of this chamber, composed of gigantic layers or strata, so interlocked that each layer held its superincumbent strata in position. It seemed, if one should be displaced by a sudden shock, that the entire mass would fall crashing to the rocky floor below. A flight of square blocks of stone served as a stairway to an opening in the uneven wall of the room. It led into a second vault-like chamber, where a small fire in the cleft of a projection in the wall served to illuminate the abode of the hermit. Buffalo-robies hung against the rocky side, thus giving the chamber a comfortable appearance. The smoke of the fire curled upward, until it found an exit through a crevice in the roof.

Richard paused and awaited the coming of the strange being, who hobbled toward the young couple after they had reached the second cavern.

He was soon beside them, and flung aside the long staff. He cast the serpent into a small chest and closed the lid.

"Here you are safe," said he, "for no one will molest you—I know that you are pursued and hunted, but they will fail to find you in the hermit's cave."

"My thanks—heartfelt thanks, are due you, sir, for you have saved this lady and myself when all hope seemed dead and that Heaven itself had forsaken us," said Richard.

"Heaven never forsakes those who call upon it in their hour of distress," responded the hermit. "Some may call, and for years that call may remain unanswered because Heaven, ever wise in all things, deemeth that the hour is not yet at hand. I have for years prayed and only received an answer to my prayer this very night."

Without another word the hermit approached Eldora and taking her face between his hands he gazed into her features and a deep sigh welled up from his heart.

His eyes filled with tears and his lips quivered with a hidden emotion.

As if to hide his feelings he released the girl and hastened away, disappearing in a cavity behind the hanging buffalo-robies.

"Strange creature," thought Richard. "Why does the fair face of this girl agitate him in this manner? Does she awaken sad memories? Perhaps some angel cheered his life in earlier days and cast sunshine and gladness upon his pathway? Eldora must recall the features of his lost one; I can find no other reason for his emotion and sudden withdrawal from her presence."

In after years when the incident came to mind he saw only too plainly the sorrow that must have torn the heart of the hermit at the moment he fled to conceal his emotion.

"Eldora," we have been saved by this person and yet he flees from our presence as if you recalled memories of the past. Perhaps your lovely face reminds him of a lost wife or daughter? We shall respect his grief and not broach the subject when he again returns."

A small pool of clear fresh water served to quench the thirst of the young persons and a quantity of fruit and wild honey placed close by the hermit's fire, served to appease their hunger.

Thus refreshed the young people wandered through the underground abode and explored the chain of caverns and the subterranean passages. Huge columns supported the immense

dome and numerous stalactites hung down like vast icicles—glittering in the rays of the flambeau that Richard held aloft.

The youth failed to find an outlet, and after wandering from one chamber into another, he finally returned to the central cavern where the replenished fire cast a ruddy glow upon the surroundings. Eldora laid her hand upon Richard's arm and motioned toward the burning twigs. Before the fire, sat the white-haired hermit, gazing into the flames, oblivious to the approach of the couple. Not until Richard laid his hand lightly upon his shoulder, did he turn and seem conscious of their presence.

"I knew that you would not leave this place," said he, "because an exit is hard to find. Come! I will show you the secret opening and then you can come and go at will."

The hermit arose and led the way out of the chamber, followed by Richard and Eldora, silently, as the strange guide strode on through the dismal windings of the place until he finally paused at the base of a huge column supporting the jagged roof.

"This is the place. Stoop!" ordered the hermit. Richard did as requested and at the base of this column he discovered an opening large enough to admit a man.

"Within this column is the winding ascent to the world above. Enter and fear not. You will find the exit in a secluded part of the desolate locality bordering upon the chaparral," the hermit explained.

Richard examined the opening and then rejoined Eldora.

"Thank you. I will use the exit when you tire of our society. At present we cannot depart without first thanking you for your timely assistance and hospitality," said Richard.

"I do not care for society! I dwell here alone. For years I have never looked upon a human face in these caverns. I live in solitude beneath the earth's surface where the power of evil men cannot reach me. When I venture into the outer world I go forth as a nameless being. Here I am also a nonentity. I have no name. I merely exist, brooding over wrongs—dreaming of a brighter life to come. It will come, but only when the angel of death has closed my eyes forever and I awake in a land where all is peace—peace and good will!"

Slowly the hermit glided away from the spot with his hands clasped and his eyes fixed upon vacancy, as if he saw the shade of a form—an invisible spirit who beckoned him to follow.

Slowly he passed out of the cavern, retracing his steps toward the central chamber while Richard and the girl followed, wondering and watching every movement of their most singular preserver.

He paused before the fire and after casting a few pieces of brushwood upon the flames, he raised the edge of a hanging robe and again disappeared behind the heavy curtains.

"Poor creature! he is demented! He has snatched us from the very jaws of death, and I would like to show my gratitude. We cannot restore him to the world because he will not listen to such a proposition. I can see that he has turned hermit because the world and its inhabitants have wronged him. Or, perhaps a dear and valued friend betrayed the trust reposed in him or her? At any rate, we must leave these caverns. He has trusted me with the knowledge of the secret exit and we must make use of it to regain the outer world."

Richard waited in vain for the hermit's return. Finally he grew impatient and drew aside the hanging buffalo-skins—but the white-haired occupant of the cavern was not to be seen. A round opening among the uneven rocks exposed the exit used by the old man. But why did he flee from those he had rescued? Twice had he disappeared without a word of explanation and for no apparent reasons.

"Eldora," we cannot remain here. This poor demented creature will do us no harm, but perhaps he would rather be alone in his dreary abode? I have a duty to perform, and that is to meet the villain Alvarez and balance accounts with him. Come! I will seek the outlet to the world above."

Richard led the way to the base of the gigantic pillar within which the spiral stairway led to the open air.

The youth paused and examined the dark cavity at the base of the column.

"Perhaps it would be best for me to explore this outlet alone," he suggested. "What do you think 'tis best to do?"

"I will wait for you here, Richard. The passage may lead to the open air and it may not. Do not fear to leave me. I will patiently await your return," said Eldora.

Whispering a few words of encouragement to the fair girl, he entered the column and began the ascent of the rough and winding stairway.

This stairway was formed by jutting masses of rock that protruded from the sides of the pillar in such a manner as to form a succession of steps winding upward in almost an unbroken flight.

Here and there the huge rocks would render the ascent somewhat difficult, but with these few exceptions the mount presented no great obstacles to Richard's journey toward the terminating point. He toiled upward slowly and carefully. Eldora waited beside the base of the column and could hear the footsteps of her lover growing fainter and fainter until they died away in the gloom far above. Occasionally she could see the faint star-like gleam of the torch that he bore as he advanced. One false step meant death to the man she had learned to love devotedly.

Eldora clasped her hands and a prayer issued from her lips. Within a short time she had listened to Richard's words of love, and they found responsive feelings in her own heart. She loved the young American officer for his many words of kindness, for his self-sacrificing deeds in her behalf when a rough crew threatened her with instant death. Yet she had a vow, an oath to fulfill. Her father's assassin was yet at large, and the deeds concerning the estates were in the hands of the murderer. Until she met him, and forced these documents or a partial confession from him, she must remain almost a beggar, without a home, without kindred.

Would love banish the feelings of duty from her heart? Would she abandon the fruitless pursuit? Abandon the patriot cause of Mexico and withdraw from the secret order, caring for no one, thinking of no one, but the man she loved?

These thoughts presented themselves to Eldora's mind as she waited beside the monster column and listened anxiously for the return of the young American. No sound came to her ears, and a silence reigned that was oppressive.

In the meantime Richard continued on his way from step to step until he paused breathless upon a huge slab of stone and gazed toward a crevice through which the sunbeams were forcing their way.

He knew that the outlet must be close at hand, and he turned to descend in order to lead Eldora over the uneven steps. A thought seemed to strike him, and he halted to reflect.

"Perhaps it would be best to proceed to the outside before bringing Eldora?" and he continued over the few remaining blocks toward the sunlight.

A few steps brought him to a low passage in the side of the column, and he placed the expiring torch in a crevice; then he pushed a round boulder aside, and the daylight streamed into the mouth of the outlet.

Richard stepped forth into the sunlight, and had but time to observe the mass of wild grapevines and the tangled chaparral, when the black muzzle of a pistol was placed to his head, and the harsh voice of Alvarez rung in his ears:

"Another step! another movement, and you're a dead man!"

CHAPTER XII.

PHELIM AMUSES THE BANDITS.

THE reader will remember that we last saw Phelim McNamara in the hands of the Mexican outlaws who, failing to overtake and capture Richard, had overpowered the Irishman, and after a short parley had allowed him to arise and loosened his bonds to enable him to walk. Phelim's tongue never rested for a moment; he taunted the Mexicans and shouted words of ridicule and defiance, while his swarthy captors led him away in the direction of the burning building.

"Ah! ha! ye are after master Richard, are yez? Well, be me sowl, ye can whistle till ye catch him. Ye black looking bullfrogs, ye piratical son of a baboon, ye come out here on the flure foreinst me, and be me grandmother's cat I'll lick ye wid me pinky."

And Phelim held up his little finger to indicate the particular finger that would be used to inflict the chastisement.

The tall Mexican whom Phelim addressed, scowled savagely upon his comrades, as if he despised them for not having killed the Irishman instead of making a prisoner of him.

"There's not a one o' yees that dares to come out and have a go wid me. Ah! ha! If I had me black thorn wid me, I'd soon show yees a crize for the dandruff. None o' yees will answer me, will yees?"

Finding that his remarks brought no answer,

Phelim contented himself by singing Rory O'More at the top of his voice.

About a quarter of a mile from the smoldering ruins of the old inn, the outlaws struck into the chaparral, and in a clearing beside a narrow stream the entire party paused.

On the verge of an eminence stood a rough building, composed of logs and adobes. A winding path led up to the door, and the windows of the hut overlooked the almost perpendicular side of the hill. From the windows to the level ground below, the distance was almost thirty feet.

The windows could be used to repel an attack, while they were almost inaccessible to the attacking party should they determine to besiege the building from that direction. Perched upon the steep mound, the structure resembled a primitive fortress.

The outlaws began the ascent to the gloomy looking pile, and Phelim was urged forward despite his threats and abuse. The foremost Mexican rapped in a peculiar manner and the door was opened, when the entire party entered the hut.

The building was divided into two compartments, and a candle served to illumine the room in which the bandits entered and seated themselves. The one who had opened the door greeted the party cordially, and several outlaws forced Phelim into the next room—securing his hands and feet, and then locking the door. From his position upon the hard floor he could hear the ruffians in the next room drinking, and his mouth watered to hear the gurgling liquor poured into the glasses, and the smacking of lips added to his desire.

"Say! one o' yees, in there! If yez have the heart of a snake about yees, ye'll come in an' give me a sup o' that stuff. Begorra, I wouldn't refuse a drop to me worst enemy, and the mouth of me a-watering like a pump. Say! d'ye hear me, in there? Oh! the smell of it is driving me crazy! Say! let me smell the breath o' one of yees!"

Not a word in reply, and the prisoner grew louder in his demands as the fumes of the liquor were wafted to his nostrils through crevices in the wall.

"The meanest lot of skunks I ever saw! They wouldn't even let me smell their breath—afraid I'd get some of the liquor's flavor," said he to himself, and then he exclaimed in loud accents:

"Say! would yees come in and look at me dying? I'll be a corpse in a few minutes and 'pon me word I'd oblige a dying man if I was yees. Come in and rub a drop upon me lips so I can die aisy! D'ye ye hear me in there? Oh! listen to them pouring that out as if it was meself that had no feeling. Say! are yees going to grant the last wish of a dying man? Bad luck to yees! I wouldn't touch yer ould liquor. It's p'izon any way—bah! I'd spit it out if ye ever dared to put it in me mouth! Come and try me, see if I wouldn't! Are yees coming in to see if I'm telling yees a lie?" Phelim paused expectantly. No answer reached his ears and he burst into a storm of abuse and threats.

Meanwhile the outlaws grew hilarious as the liquor mounted to their heads and their boisterous laughter irritated Phelim to a high degree. He gradually grew sleepy, and muttering curses upon the bandits, he fell into a fitful slumber.

He dreamed of countless casks and bottles of aromatic poteen, and he groaned aloud in his sleep.

The sun streamed into the window ere he awoke, and the footsteps of the bandits in the next room proclaimed that they were also awake and stirring.

A piece of coarse bread and musty cheese were placed beside him during the day and in spite of his pleadings he was denied even a drop of the "craythur."

The afternoon wore away, and Phelim was on the point of again making a loud demand for something to drink, when a commotion arose among the bandits, and the sound of approaching footsteps told of the arrival of visitors.

Phelim crawled to the door and found a crevice that enabled him to view the next room, and all its occupants. An exclamation of surprise fell from his lips. He saw the evil features of Alvarez, and several of his lawless followers, and among them with his arms pinioned was Richard!

A low whistle broke from Phelim's lips, as he realized the fact that Richard was a captive like himself, and in the power of his sworn enemy.

"Master Richard's in the same fix as I am!"

said he, "and they'll keep their eyes upon us now, and not give us a chance to give 'em the slip. What shall I do to help him? Begorra, I'm powerless to help meself! Hello! what's that?"

Phelim's eyes rested upon a coil of rope lying among several kegs and boxes, that were thrown into a corner of the room. The Irishman's hands were tied but he managed to reach the coil of rope and he kicked it into the midst of the kegs, in order to conceal it, and then returned to the door.

"There now!" said he. "I may want a rope, and if I do I'll know where to find one. What are they going to do wid Master Richard, I don't know."

Phelim was not kept in suspense much longer, for the door opened, and a gruff voice summoned him to come forth.

The Irishman obeyed, and passed into the room, and met Richard face to face.

"Arrah, master Richard, it's meself that's sorry to see you here. Worra, worra, how are yez ever going to git out at all, at all?"

A look of mingled surprise and joy rested upon Richard's features when he first beheld Phelim emerge from the room, and at the sound of the Celt's voice he smiled to reassure the faithful fellow.

"Don't worry, Phelim! I am sorry to meet you here, but as we are to be fellow-prisoners we must endeavor to be cheerful."

Before Phelim could reply Richard was forced into the room lately occupied by his serving-man, and the door locked. Phelim was allowed to sit in a corner of the room occupied by the bandits.

"Keep an eye upon them," commanded Alvarez. "Remember I hold you all responsible for their safe keeping. Don't allow them to remain together for a moment."

"Go and soak your head!" muttered the Irishman; "it will do yer brains good."

Alvarez took his departure.

"Good-by! May Ould Nick fly away wid you," shouted Phelim after the retreating form of the villain.

Phelim contented himself by abusing the rascals that sat about the table. Now and then he managed to come among them, but was soon forced back into his corner by several swarthy Greasers, who used no gentle means to do so. During one of these attempts to reach the table Phelim managed to clutch a knife that lay upon the edge of the rough table, and although his hands were secured he still retained his grasp upon the handle of the weapon, and when he reached his corner he had the knife concealed in his sleeve.

"Begorra, I've got something anyways," he muttered. "Now, I can amuse myself at the ropes whin I have a chance."

In order to attract attention and prevent the owner of the knife from discovering his loss, Phelim began singing a comical ditty, and introduced a number of trills and turns in the quaint melody, causing the Mexicans to laugh. He followed up the advantage by singing numerous Irish songs, ever making them eccentric and peculiar to raise a laugh from his listeners. He introduced words in his melodies intended for Richard's ears, and which the Mexicans naturally supposed were part of the songs. The burden of Phelim's words, sung to the most outrageous droning and extemporized melodies, were:

"I've got a knife—to cut your ropes—when I get a chance—to be near you."

Gradually he grew into favor with the bandits, and to cap the climax one of the ruffians gave him a small quantity of the liquor in order to induce him to sing again.

Phelim pretended that he did not feel disposed to sing, but the second glass brought forth the desired song, and it was sung at the top of his voice, causing the rafters of the building to echo.

Finally, by dint of coaxing and promises to sing and dance for their amusement, the lawless fellows released the Irishman, but gave him to understand that the least sign of treachery or making the slightest attempt to escape would result in his instant death.

"Is it me trying to l'ave yees? Never! never! while yees have the poteen on the table!" cried Phelim, and then he burst forth into a wild melody and executed a number of grotesque steps that brought forth shouts and laughter from the outlaws.

"Look here, now," demanded Phelim, "don't ye think it's mighty mean not to give the poor feller in the next room a chance to see me amusing meself?"

But the bandits would not listen to such a

proposal, and Phelim refused to sing or dance. "I don't want him in here," he explained, "but ye can open the door and he can look on—d'ye see? What harm can he do? He can't come in here wid the hands of him tied and all of yees armed and ready to use the weepings—can he?"

Phelim's argument satisfied the bandits who were anxious to witness the Irishman's terpsichorian accomplishments, and the door leading into Richard's room was flung open. The young American could see all that transpired in the room and witness Phelim's dancing also.

The bandits were facing the door and their eyes could observe the prostrate form of their prisoner lying near the mass of kegs and boxes.

Phelim began his dancing and as his voice grew louder, his limbs flew in all directions in time to his wild music. His arms flew around like wind-mills, and now and then he burst forth into a series of wild "hurroos." Suddenly he managed to produce the knife he had stolen from the table, and during one of his wildest evolutions he passed the door of Richard's room and flung the knife to the young man.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

THE movement was executed rapidly and the sound of the knife as it fell was smothered by the noise of Phelim's heels as he plunged into a series of steps that riveted all eyes upon him. He paused breathless, and a chorus of shouts greeted his efforts.

Richard was quick to notice the movement made by the dancing Irishman, and as the knife fell close beside him he seized it and in the twinkling of an eye it was concealed behind him, ready to sever the ropes binding his hands.

The Mexicans poured out a glass of spirits and Phelim raised the liquor to his lips. "Here's a toast for yees!" said he. "Here's may good luck follow yees—and never overtake yees."

Phelim drained his glass and the Mexicans did likewise.

"Sing—more!" shouted a scowling ruffian who labored under the effect of the liquor.

"Not another song! Me throat is all sung out. But I'll tell yees the funniest story that ye ever heard. D'ye like stories?"

"Yes—yes," came from the bandits.

"Well, then, ye'll have to be quiet all of yees and don't yees laugh till the place where the laugh comes in—will yees?"

"No—no!" said the ruffians in unison.

"Well, now, give me yer attention all o' yees, and listen to every word I say, bec'ase it concerns somebody. Don't let yees miss a word of it. First of all, it happened in Ireland—to me and my brother. One day we was out on the hills, and, would ye believe it, the two of us was taken prisoners by as dirty and thieving a looking crowd as ye are—saving yer presence—and we were taken up to the place where these blackguards had their roost—same as ye have—and our hands were tied and we couldn't move hand or foot to scratch our heads—d'ye see?"

A peal of laughter answered Phelim's question, and the Irishman continued.

"By and by, me brother got hold of a knife and while I was telling the dirty-looking baboons a story—same as I'm telling it to yees—me brother was cutting the ropes and divil a one o' them smelt a rat at all, at all. After he had the ropes cut and his hands and feet were at liberty he listened to what I told him to do; but me throat is getting dry again; fill up every one o' yees!" and Phelim filled the glasses and arose to offer another toast.

"Here's—may ye never have the wool pulled over yer eyes—till I pull it," he added, in lower tones, and the glasses were emptied.

During the recital of Phelim's story, Richard had severed the ropes, and his hands and feet were at liberty. He paused to listen to the remainder of the story, feeling that the story was meant for him, and the instructions were intended to be put into immediate effect.

"Well, ye see, after he had the hands and feet of him at liberty, I told him to go to the lot of old boxes and barrels in the corner of the room; but he had to do it mighty slick, or the vagabonds would see him, but I kept them busy while he went to the barrels and found a rope."

"Did he find a rope?" said one of the bandits.

"Deed he did, and he done it very slick. He got the rope and laid down in the same place—ha! ha! ha! Did ye ever see such a lot of fools in all your life?" and Phelim roared.

The Mexicans joined in the laughter.

"Ye wouldn't find men like ye, being fooled so easily, would ye?"

"No! no!" cried the rogues, amidst shouts of laughter, and Phelim roared louder.

During the story Richard had secured the

rope, and now lay waiting further instructions.

"Well, ye see, he got the rope, and I knew it, but the spalpeens didn't know it; they were the worst lot of wooden heads I ever saw—till I met yees, saving your presence. Well, ye see, he got the rope, and I told him to go carefully to a window and open it—d'ye see? It was a great height from the window down to the ground, but then ye see he had the rope, and he could lower himself easily, and I told him to do it while I kept the blackguards interested wid a story I was telling them—same as I'm telling it to ye. But now come the worst part of it all. He was afraid they'd hear him, but how could they, whin I'd laugh me loudest this way"—and Phelim burst into a peal of laughter that caused his keepers to join in the hilarious outburst.

Richard was at the window, and forced it open during the noise of the laughter, and fastened the rope just as Phelim concluded his cachinnations and again filled the glasses for another toast.

"Here's to your stupidity, and may yees never have any less of it!" Whether the Mexicans understood the Irishman, or their befuddled condition prevented them so doing, they nevertheless drank the toast with shouts of pleasure. "Shout away, me boys, yer doing nicely!" cried Phelim; "and now for me story: me brother had everything ready, and he commenced crawling out of the window. He was half-way out, and they hadn't ne'er a one, even smelt the presence of a mouse—whin I began to fear that something might happen, ye know, whin I grabbed a pistol from one o' thim—same as I do now from you"—and Phelim grasped the hilt of a weapon in the belt of the nearest bandit and withdrew it, laughing, "and thim I took another revolver from another blackguard—same as I take yours, ye know"—and the cunning romancer reached forth and secured another weapon from the unsuspecting ruffian near the table.

"Then, ye see, I had two pistols, and I shouted to me brother to git as if the divil was after him, and I raised me pistols and I blazed away!"

Two sharp explosions rent the air, and two bandits sunk at the Irishman's feet.

Had a thunderbolt exploded among the bandits, they could not have been more astounded.

Before they could recover from this sudden astonishment, Phelim's weapons cracked again, and a brace of outlaws sunk to the floor with bullets lodged in their brains. With a wild hurroo Phelim leaped to the door and darted down the pathway, while a volley of firearms echoed among the crags, serving to accelerate the Irishman's speed.

Richard had just reached the ground from the window, by aid of the rope, as Phelim dashed up to the spot.

"Come, Master Richard, away wid ye! They're after us, and goodness knows how many o' thim may be in the neighborhood. We'd best get out of it entirely."

Richard seized the Irishman's hand and wrung it cordially, as the two dashed away, with the outlaws in full pursuit, and not many hundred yards in their rear.

Once in the tangled chaparral, the fugitives could evade the bandits, but hardly had they gained the recesses affording a concealment when shouts arose from another quarter of the wilderness. Another party was approaching from the very direction in which the fugitives sought to escape!

"That's bad," muttered Phelim. "The blackguards are signaling, and we'll be surrounded."

"My plan is to separate and conceal ourselves," cried Richard. "What do you say, Phelim—don't you think 'tis best?"

"Faith, I do! Come this way and then you go to the left and I'll scoot off to the right. Here, take one o' these pistols—ye'll need it. There's no use of fighting a regiment of the vagabonds in such a place as this; they could shoot us down, and we wouldn't know it!"

Richard took the proffered weapon, and again grasping Phelim's hand, the two men separated. Richard plunged into the tangled wild vines, and Phelim into the tall weeds, while the sounds of the pursuers drew nearer as if the entire chaparral was surrounded by the bandits.

Richard reached a secluded spot, and lay beneath a mass of vines, listening to the voices of his pursuers.

Phelim continued his flight until he reached a steep declivity, and finally found himself in a glen. A swift stream wound through the desolate spot and a few fallen trees served as a bridge to cross the waters.

Bleak rocks arose upon all sides almost shutting out the light of day.

A huge tree had fallen beside the stream, and one end was partially submerged in the muddy waters.

One glance revealed the fact, that the prostrate trunk was hollow and Phelim made his way rapidly toward this place of refuge, and crawled into it feet foremost, and was thus enabled to see what transpired in the glen without being observed, unless the trunk was closely examined.

He had hardly arranged himself in the narrow trunk, when approaching footsteps warned him that some one was close at hand. In a few moments a man bearing a rifle, strode into the glen and halted. It was Alvarez, and his basilisk eyes swept the surroundings, until they finally rested upon the hollow tree.

He came toward it, bearing his rifle in his hands ready for use.

"That settles it!" murmured Phelim; "he's coming for me because he's seen the red head of me."

Instead of pausing and examining the base of the tree, Alvarez walked to its center and took a seat upon the prostrate trunk.

He placed his rifle within a few inches of the opening and gazed up-stream as if awaiting some one.

"Strange that I have missed them," he said, loud enough for Phelim to overhear every word. "Jasper was fortunate in securing the girl and I have got the American safe in my hands."

"Ye have—over the left," thought Phelim.

"I left Jasper and his men conveying the girl toward our retreat while myself and several others started forward to ascertain the cause of the shouts and reports of firearms coming apparently from this direction. Has anything happened at the log house?"

"Well, I should smile!" murmured Phelim to himself. "Ye'll be astonished when ye get there. Ye'll not find me nor Master Richard, d'ye mind that? Arrah, look at the gun!"

Phelim's eyes caught sight of the butt of the rifle leaning against the opening and he silently drew it into the hollow trunk where he could grasp it and handle the trigger.

Alvarez was so busily engaged watching for the coming of his comrades that he failed to notice the disappearance of his rifle.

Suddenly a shrill scream resounded from the tangled forest beyond and the villain leaped to his feet and glanced hastily about for his weapon.

"Confound it, where's my rifle?" he cried.

Another scream reached his ears and the next moment Eldora came bounding into the clearing as if fleeing from unseen pursuers. The moment her eyes rested upon Alvarez, her face paled and like a startled fawn she fled toward the rude bridge. Alvarez darted forward to intercept her but she passed under his outstretched arm and eluded him.

With a glad cry she flung herself into the arms of a man who bounded into the glen and clasped the girl to his breast.

It was Richard! and as Alvarez darted forward the young American leveled a revolver full at his head and with a brutal oath the villain shrunk back.

"Jasper! Jasper! where are you?" he shouted. "Here!" cried the rascal known as Jasper, as he rushed out of the thick bushes, knife in hand. "I'm here!"

"And so am I!" yelled Phelim, emerging from the hollow tree; and he leveled the rifle at Jasper, bringing the villain to a dead stop.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TABLES ARE TURNED.

ELDORA waited long and patiently for Richard's return after he had ascended the rocky stairway within the huge column in the hermit's cave.

At length she resolved to enter the hollow pillar and ascend the stairway in search of her lover.

She ignited a piece of the rosin-wood which Richard had left in her care to serve as torches until his return, stepped within the hollow column and proceeded upward, to finally pause at the entrance where Richard had displaced the bowlders; there she emerged into the open air.

Her first discovery was footprints of many persons imprinted in the yielding earth and the unmistakable signs of a struggle having taken place.

"Oh! Richard, Richard, where are you?" she unconsciously exclaimed, as she stood with clasped hands tearfully regarding the spot.

"I will answer that question," said a voice that caused her heart almost to cease its beatings and the blood almost to forsake her cheeks.

She turned to confront the man she most loathed.

"Alvarez!" she murmured, shrinking from the villain.

"Yes; pray do not move away from me. Allow me to tell you that I was watching this exit for a certain person, and instead of capturing him I found my old friend, the American, and in a moment he was bound hand and foot and is en route for our retreat in the chaparral. Thinking that you might not be far away I lingered in the vicinity and I have been rewarded." Alvarez placed a whistle to his lips and a shrill blast rung again and again.

A dozen swarthy forms arose from the cactus plants that studded the earth's surface and whose monstrous leaves and stalks afforded a good hiding-place for the bandits.

They awaited Alvarez's orders.

"You see that these gentlemen are ready to escort you to our mountain retreat, so you will go with us without giving trouble."

To attempt an escape was useless, and by accompanying the bandits she could again meet Richard; so she did not hesitate to follow the ruffians, Alvarez walking by her side.

"Eldora, you must forgive me for the part I have taken in this affair. When you know my real motive I am sure you will not condemn me and think that I am persecuting you. Listen to me. I can tell you all in a very few words. I have learned to love you, but saw that the young American was a formidable rival and that you favored him. This incensed me and I scarcely knew what I did. I have acted upon the old maxim that all is fair in love and war and I have captured my prize. Now tell me, Eldora, that I do not love you in vain; bid me hope. All—all that you can possibly desire shall be placed at your command. I have wealth which you shall share with me. Tell me that there is hope," and the wily villain paused, waiting the reply of the girl.

"Alvarez! the wealth of the Indies would not cause me to look more favorably upon you. I cannot disguise my feelings; I hate you—hate you for your cowardly actions upon the deck of your vessel when you allowed your ruffians to almost trample me beneath their feet, and you, coward that you are, doomed me to death because I lay concealed upon the vessel—friendless and alone. Away from me, sir, nor dare to breathe words of love to me again!" Eldora's eyes flashed and her lips quivered as she turned upon the villain.

"You love the young American?" he gritted.

"Yes; and I am proud to acknowledge that I have won the love of a brave and honest man," said she, haughtily.

"Take care! take care!" hissed Alvarez in a voice husky with passion. "Remember that you are in my power, surrounded by men who acknowledge no master but myself. My word is law and every wish is executed instantly. You can see for yourself that pleasant words will suit much better than those you have uttered."

"I do not fear you. You war upon women, therefore I must expect nothing but insults from you. You have my answer. My heart is in the keeping of one who will treasure the love it bears for him."

"Not long will he live to treasure it. You forget that he is also my prisoner. He stands between me and the object of my love; can you guess what I will do to rid myself of him? I will kill him before your very eyes, and then, willing or unwilling, you shall become mine!"

His eyes scintillated with passion, and his face was purple with rage.

"Monster! do your worst! With my last breath I will still whisper that I scorn and despise you."

Alvarez could not restrain the curse that flew to his lips, and he strode away to hide his intense passion. He ground the blades of grass under his heel, and smote the briars and vines from his path savagely with his rifle.

A smile of contempt played upon the girl's lips as she observed the villain giving vent to his blind wrath.

The party had entered a dense growth of tall mesquite and vines, when a chorus of shouts resounded from afar, and the faint crack of firearms came borne upon the still air.

"Something's wrong in the direction of our retreat!" shouted Alvarez. "Guard well the prisoner and come forward with me, several of you that are well-armed!"

He darted forward, with several ruffians at his heels.

The shouts grew louder, and the report of firearms sounded close at hand.

The signals in the depths of the chaparral the bandit chief understood.

"Separate here!" he shouted, "and meet me in the glen!"

The men darted away in different directions, now and then pausing to listen for the shouts, their weapons ready for immediate use.

Alvarez soon strode into the glen and approached the hollow tree wherein Phelim lay concealed.

Eldora watched her chances and at a favorable moment bounded away from her guard, who followed in rapid pursuit.

Her footsteps also were toward the glen, where, as we have seen, she was, ere long, clasped to Richard's bosom. It was a strange and unexpected meeting and in a most thrilling moment.

Richard held Alvarez at bay with his revolver, and Phelim, with the captured rifle leveled at Jasper's head, kept that scoundrel almost rooted to the spot.

Fear and surprise were depicted upon the features of the two villains.

For a few moments they stood there, cowering before the ready rifle and revolver; but even as the two scoundrels stood immovable there, a dozen forms glided into the glen from different points, and before Phelim or Richard could turn they were completely hemmed in, and a full half-dozen rifles and pistols were at their heads.

Phelim broke the stock of his rifle upon the head of the foremost bandit, but before he could repeat the act, he was beaten down insensible to the earth.

The tables were turned, and Alvarez was again master of the situation.

"Now, my bold American—and your Irish friend also—can rest easy in the hands of the men who will look after your comfort. I'll warrant you won't give me any further trouble. A few moments ago you held my life at your command, and should have seized upon the opportunity thus offered. Your life is now in my hands! Expect no mercy. Plead for none, for you die," hissed the villain.

"Plead to you for mercy—ha! ha! ha! I would rather die than speak one word imploring pity from you!" cried Richard. "Take my life, but let me ask one favor, if you still have a spark of manhood left in you—spare that girl. She has never wronged you; let her depart and offer her no insult. My life is in your hands; take it; but spare that girl!"

"Spare her?" cried Alvarez; "I spare her now because when your carcass lies bleeding at my feet, she shall gaze upon you and then she becomes mine—mine! Do you fully understand me?"

"Villain, would that my hands were free! Ay, kill me, for I swear that if I again have an opportunity I will crush you as I would a venomous snake."

"There is no possibility that you will ever give me any further trouble! Your moments are numbered. Come, men! Bear them away," commanded Alvarez as he turned to depart.

"Whither, captain?"

"To the vaults beneath the ruined abbey!"

A dismantled and ruined building in the midst of a neglected cemetery, not far from the main road, loomed out of the dusk, and beside this ruin the outlaw and his retinue paused before they entered the crumbling structure. Broken tombs littered the old churchyard and gave the place a ghostly appearance. Raising a huge slab of marble close beside a ruined arch of the building, the outlaws and their three prisoners descended a damp and slippery flight of stone steps.

Alvarez remained behind to close the tomb, and as he stooped to descend he felt the cold muzzle of a pistol pressed close to his temple. He turned to meet the gaze of the masked figure of the unknown!

CHAPTER XV.

THE FOILED ASSASSIN.

BENEATH the old abbey were a number of large, roomy vaults, wherein both monks and prisoners found ample places for concealment or safe keeping at a period when insurrection reared its head.

The crumbling walls and arches of the abbey bore evidence of the iron hail that had swept over that field several days before the fall of Vera Cruz in the brilliant campaign during which Scott gained imperishable renown for his important victories.

The shattered tombs and monuments remained in the same condition as the contending forces

left the field after the hand-to-hand struggle in the place of the dead.

The iron doors of the vaults had been repaired, and Alvarez and his league found a safe retreat beneath the abandoned abbey.

The ruffians pillaged the homes of both parties, and pretended to serve either faction when an opportunity afforded them a rich harvest for their pains.

It was into these vaults that the bandits descended and led the three prisoners into their dark and chilling recesses.

Jasper placed them in separate vaults, and swung the heavy doors into their places and locked them from without.

"This is a nice place for a gossoon to be in. Faith I'll catch a dampness lying upon the flure. It's a bed of down I have—down on the flure. Bad luck to me! Look at the bats a-flying round the head of me!" and Phelim made a few wild attempts to strike at several bats which he had disturbed by his presence. "Scat out of that! Oh! Saint Patrick come down and drive out the bats before they pull me hair out and its bald-headed I am. Will ye lave off flying 'round me head, ye ugly imps o' Satan? Scat!"

Phelim seized upon broken pieces of crockery that lay upon the floor of the dungeon-like chamber, and flung the bits at the fluttering bats.

For several hours he amused himself in this manner.

"How am I going to slape wid the bats a-flying 'round me head like missquiteers? I wish I had a net for me bed. But where's the bed? Oh! I forgot! Here's the pillow," and Phelim produced a huge stone from the corner of the vault and placed it in position to rest his head upon.

"Begorra, there's a mighty little taste of feathers in this pillow, and sorra one o' me knows w'ether it wouldn't be better for me to wait till they kill a chicken and borry the feathers to stuff the stone so I can get a wink of sleep!"

Phelim rested his head upon the stone and for a full hour he lay tossing and striving to find a "soft spot" on the stone. At length he fell into a fitful slumber, and while he slumbered a peculiar grating sound came from the slimy wall directly behind the sleeping Irishman, and, ere long, a square block of stone began to move, and some unseen person withdrew it, leaving an aperture through which a faint ray of light shone into the vaulted chamber.

Then a face appeared at the opening.

"Say, Irish! Irish!" said a voice, in low tones, "vos you asleep? Say, Irish!"

Phelim opened his eyes, and rubbed them in a dazed manner.

"Who the divil is that talking about the Irish?" he growled sleepily. "Is it the bats?"

"Say! wake out—dot's me—your oit friendt Carl vot vas sea-sick mit you on dot ship, vot had de fireworks and vent up like de skyrocket—don't you vos remember?"

"Give us your fist, Dutchy!" cried Phelim joyfully, but he paused; one limb was secured to a huge ring in the floor by a stout chain. "I'm chained like a dog to his kennel," he cried tugging at the iron links.

"I know dot! Don't make such noises. Here! dot's a bunch of keys," whispered Carl, and he flung the keys into Phelim's extended hands. "I can't go through dis hole because I vos too fat, so you must hellup yourself. Here! dot's a small file—now go to work; I vill vatch outside. De keys vill open de door; I stole dem; hurry up now!"

Phelim seized the file that Carl flung into the vault, and the stout German withdrew from the aperture, leaving Phelim busily engaged at the chain.

"Faith it's Jack Sheppard I am now!" said he filing at the chain. "Scat out of that! Be gob if I catch one o' ye bats I'll file the wings off o' ye—bad 'cess to ye, anyways!"

While Phelim is alternately filing the chains, and striking at his winged tormentors, we will glance into the next vault which is built similar to the one in which the Irishman is imprisoned. Richard sat in the gloomy vault, busily engaged in reviewing the incidents of the past few weeks. In the partition of the vault was a narrow grated window. He could not reach it without standing upon some object, therefore he had not even deigned to peer through the iron bars to observe the occupant of the next vault.

He could hear the sound of a voice now and then, but the hollow tones caused by the arched roof of the chamber, prevented him from recognizing its owner.

It was Phelim vowing vengeance upon the bats. Richard had just bowed his head and his thoughts were fixed upon the fair being whom he loved so well, when a key turned in the lock of the iron door, and a grating sound followed as the door swung upon its hinges. A person bearing a lamp entered and gazed upon the manacled prisoner with a leer of satisfaction.

It was Jasper—Richard's sworn enemy! "At last we have got you in a safe place, haven't we?" said the ruffian with a grim smile of satisfaction. "I would again remind you of the blow you struck me, for I intend to repay you for that."

"You need not fear me," replied Richard as he saw Jasper move away as he raised his head. "You see I am heavily ironed—I can do you no harm. Were I free to use these hands I could repeat the blow that seems to worry you so much, but I must satisfy myself by waiting until my time arrives!"

"You'll wait a long time!" retorted Jasper. "These ruins are never visited, and if that was your hope, abandon it at once. You will probably never see the sunlight again. Alvarez has not returned but he has instructed me to carry out his wishes. You are to die, and you may guess how happy I am to be enabled to carry out the sentence personally. I thought I'd call to prepare you—I hate to take you unawares you know."

Jasper laughed at what he considered a sarcastic rebuke, but the young man paid no attention to his humor, and the low-browed ruffian passed out from the vault.

The key turned in the lock and Richard was again alone to commune with his thoughts. Phelim had just severed the link in the chain when he was aroused from his labor by the sound of a footstep in the adjoining passage.

"Saints defend us—somebody's coming!" he ejaculated; "what'll I do now?"

A key turned in the lock and the door began to move. Phelim glided swiftly beside the door which, fortunately, opened inward. As it swung into the vault Phelim slid behind it and he was concealed from the gaze of the person who entered the dungeon.

The person was Jasper, and close behind him came the beautiful captive. As they stepped forward well into the vault, Phelim glided out noiseless as a shadow, and darted into the dark passage.

"I thought we had the Irishman in this chamber," said Jasper, musingly; "perhaps I am mistaken in the locality of the vault. However, this dungeon will answer the purpose very well. Eldora, you will remain here. You may console yourself with the thought that your lover is in the vault to your right. You will hear his moan of agony when the death blow is struck, for he dies to-night!"

Jasper walked slowly to the door while speaking and swung the door into its place as he delivered the concluding words, and locked it.

The poor girl gave way to her sorrow and the tears coursed down upon her cheeks like the summer rain.

At length moaning and sobbing she closed her eyes and knelt upon the cold floor and offered up a prayer to the All-Wise Ruler who is ever ready to hearken unto the call of the distressed.

Again the heavy door opened and Eldora arose in time to behold the sinister countenance of Alvarez who was about to enter the vault. Close behind him came the repulsive dwarf, Stefano, rubbing his hands with glee as if he scented blood from afar.

Alvarez strode into the center of the vault and placed the lantern upon the floor. A long knife protruded from the red sash worn by the deformed creature and he toyed with the weapon ominously as Eldora glanced toward him and with a shudder drew away toward the wall.

"Eldora, I have returned to visit you," said Alvarez. "I have concluded to extend my mercy to the American provided you give a satisfactory answer to the question I am about to ask you."

"You need not ask the question, for I know its import. Do not speak of love to me. Do not speak of mercy, either, for there is not a spark left slumbering in your black heart," cried Eldora.

"Have a care!" warned the villain as he made a step forward as if to seize the girl, but, quick as the flight of an arrow, she darted toward the dwarf, to grasp the knife from his sash and spring away in time to flash the steel before the amazed villain.

"Don't approach me!" she cried in a voice of desperation, "or I'll redden this blade with your blood!"

Alvarez saw the fierce light that came into

her eyes; he beheld the ruby lips pressed close together and he saw deadly determination plainly written upon the pale features of the beautiful girl.

"That's your game, is it?" he hissed, savagely. "Very well; in a few moments the man you love will be lifeless upon the floor of the next vault. Ho! there, Stefano! In the next dungeon you will find the American. He is chained. Take this knife and make short work of him."

Alvarez handed a dagger to the dwarf, who shuffled out of the vault.

"Matteo! Matteo!" shouted Alvarez. In reply to the call a short, villainous Mexican appeared in the passage, armed with a rifle, and he entered the vault.

"Matteo, guard this girl until my return. If she attempts to pass you, shoot her dead upon the spot—do you hear?"

The human brute made a hasty exit from the vault and Matteo strode forward.

He had barely taken several steps when a figure darted through the doorway and felled the Mexican to the floor and seized his gun. It was Phelim!

"Keep quiet, miss; I'll guard the door. Here! take these keys and get upon one of these barrels and see if ye can open that grated windy up there. Quick or ye'll be too late!" Phelim flung a barrel into the vault and, rifle in hand, he stood at the door, ready to shoot down the first intruder that presented himself.

Eldora placed the barrel under the window and in a second she was upon it, and fitting a key to the lock. By the dim light that came through the open door of Richard's dungeon she could see the ugly dwarf, weapon in hand, just entering the vault.

"Oh! Heaven aid me! Heaven aid me!" she groaned aloud as she endeavored to fit the key in the rusty lock. It turned slightly; she placed her strength into a supreme effort and the bolt shot back.

She seized the iron bars and tugged at them to draw them back upon their creaking hinges. Not a moment was to be lost. The hideous dwarf was beside the helpless prisoner and the glitter of his dagger told that the deformed fiend was ready to strike the deadly blow.

Eldora drew herself to the sill of the window overlooking Richard's dungeon, and as the dwarf's weapon was raised aloft she sprang down like a young tigress and seized the assassin.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TOMBS GIVE UP THEIR OCCUPANTS.

WHEN the unknown presented the pistol, at the astonished villain he merely exclaimed "Halt!" and the click, click, of the weapon brought Alvarez to a motionless attitude as if he was rooted to the spot.

He saw the gleaming eyes through the apertures in the mask and he knew that his life hung by a slender thread.

He recognized the man of mystery whom he had launched into the pit and who had escaped both the terrible fall and the murderous dwarf. No wonder that Alvarez was chilled to the marrow and his limbs refused to bear him. He clutched the sides of the tomb for support.

The man of mystery pressed the muzzle of the pistol so close to the villain's head that when he withdrew it—a round crimson ring was imprinted upon the scoundrel's temple.

"Come from that entrance," said the masked figure, in a voice that added to Alvarez's terror.

Mechanically he obeyed the order, and arose from the aperture more dead than alive.

While the unknown covered him with his revolver with one hand he produced a rope and unwound it.

"Place your hands behind you," ordered the mask.

Alvarez obeyed, and in a few seconds the villain's hands were secured.

"Now, villain, I can talk to you and not be obliged to keep my weapon at your head. Cunning, treacherous wolf that you are, I have you at length in my power. The day of retribution is almost at hand."

"What have I ever done to you?" gasped the miscreant.

"What have you done to me?" cried the masked figure. "You have compelled me to live a life of agony and torture. You have compelled me to conceal myself beneath the earth's surface and forget that I ever had a home or those whom I could love and call mine!"

"I do not know you. Why do you persecute and haunt me?" whined Alvarez.

"The time is not yet arrived for a full disclosure. You will know me in due time. Do you remember the friend that trusted you? The friend whom you murdered? The friend whom you robbed? Villain, are you not afraid that the very earth will open at your feet and engulf you? You murdered the friend that trusted, and perhaps destroyed his only child, a girl whom you have deprived of the estates rightfully hers by virtue of the will of Don Miguel La Vega!"

At the sound of that name Alvarez turned still paler.

"La Vega trusted you," continued the mask, "and you repaid the trust by killing and robbing him. The child lives—lives to assert her wrongs and denounce the murderer. She will know him by his branded hand—the letter A burned into the palm—the mark of Cain—Assassin!"

A low groan escaped from the white lips of the pinioned wretch.

"It was by your hand that I was hurled into the pit, and by your orders that the dwarf sought my life. The days of triumph are reversed; it is my turn now."

And the cloaked figure raised the polished revolver. The moonbeams fell upon the weapon, and also exposed the countenance of the cowering villain.

"Mercy! mercy!" he gasped.

"Dare you beg for what you have denied to others? How often have the doomed knelt at your feet, imploring pity? How often have you almost trampled upon them, and laughed at their cries? You—beg for mercy! Fiend! human monster! Expect no mercy from me, because I have no heart. I live but for vengeance, and the man whom I have hunted to destroy is you!"

Again came the click of the lock, and Alvarez looked into the very muzzle of the leveled weapon.

The man of mystery stepped forward, but before he could press the trigger a form dashed through the dismantled tombs and struck up the unknown's hand as the pistol was discharged. The bullet whistled harmlessly into the air.

Before the masked figure could turn, a heavy blow descended upon his head and the unknown sunk to the earth. In a moment the ropes binding Alvarez's hands, were cut in twain, and the villain stood at liberty.

"Gomez! you have saved my life!" cried Alvarez, and he clasped the hand of the guerrilla chief, and wrung it cordially.

"You are too precious to me," confessed Gomez; "I don't want to have you die before I get my share of the fortune."

"Now to discover the secret of this masked figure. I will tear aside his mask, and the man of mystery will be a mystery no longer," cried Alvarez, darting forward.

At that instant, the dull report of a pistol came from the depths of the open tomb and both the villains turned. Gomez drew his rifle as he sprang toward the tomb, but, ere he had reached it, the prostrate figure of the unknown raised itself upon its elbow and quick as a flash he leveled the pistol that he still retained in his grasp—and fired. With a shriek of pain Gomez pitched forward and fell headlong upon a marble slab—dead.

With the agility of a squirrel Alvarez leaped into the open tomb nor paused to close the slab.

"He has escaped me for the present," cried the unknown in a voice betraying his disappointment, "but his confederate in the crime lies dead at my feet. The tool has paid the penalty of that distasteful crime;—now for the instigator."

The masked figure withdrew into the shadows of the huge ruined arches, and like a visitor from the other world glided away in the gloom.

Alvarez reached the dark passage under the tomb and paused a moment to assure himself that he was not followed. "It's an ill wind that blows no good," he growled. "The unknown came near finishing me, but, thanks to his pistol, he has rid me of Gomez. I can still have the spoils—all to myself—and share with no one."

A few yards further in the passage he met Stefano. "What was the meaning of that pistol-shot?" demanded Alvarez, sharply.

"I don't know, master; I believe that some one tried to force an entrance into one of the vaults, and Jasper fired at the person," replied the dwarf.

"Indeed! you must be careful and watch the prisoners day and night."

Alvarez visited Richard's vault and later, accompanied by the dwarf, he entered Eldora's

dungeon and, as the reader has witnessed, he sent Stefano to dispatch the young American.

It will be remembered that Eldora sprang through the window, and seized the dwarf as he raised the knife.

So quickly had she grasped the hideous creature that he could not turn to offer resistance. She seized his knife, and buried it up to its hilt in the misshapen body.

Stefano sunk upon the stone floor, while Eldora stood speechless with horror as she contemplated the dripping knife she held in her hand.

Phelim had stepped from the doorway to observe the struggle in the adjoining vault, when Alvarez rushed past him and sprang upon the barrel.

One look, one glance through the window, and he comprehended the situation. He saw Eldora with the blood-stained knife and the dwarf lying at her feet. Not having observed the features of the Irishman he naturally supposed it was his bandit sentry, Matteo!

Turning rapidly, his face livid with passion and his voice husky with anger, he exclaimed:

"Matteo! shoot! Shoot into this vault," and he pointed into Richard's dungeon.

"Faith I will shoot! Look out for the top o' yer head!" shouted Phelim, and he leveled the rifle at the astonished villain.

Alvarez clung to the window-sill, speechless and incapable of moving hand or foot. Before he could realize the intentions of the Irishman that individual had darted out and slammed the door and turned the key in the lock.

Alvarez was imprisoned in the vault! Phelim ran to the next vault and stood ready with his rifle while he cried out to Eldora, who still remained motionless: "Come, miss, cut your stick out of this! Hould up a bit! Try these keys on the locks of those chains or Master Richard won't be able to go wid us."

Eldora seized the few keys that Phelim had removed from the ring, upon which numerous others had been strung, and which Carl had flung into the vault. Fortunately one of the keys fitted and opened the lock of the manacles.

Richard embraced the fair girl and pressed her to his bosom.

"No time for any o' that love making! Begorra, there'll be a funeral instead of a wedding if yer not in a bit of a hurry!" shouted Phelim impatiently.

Richard took the trembling hand of his preserver in his own and quickly followed after the Irishman.

They hurried along the dark passage until a flight of stone steps presented themselves like a barrier across the narrow archway.

"Up these steps! No matter where they lead," cried Phelim. "Hurry, for I hear the spalpeens after us."

Then came a chorus of shouts and the tramping of many feet.

The bandits were in pursuit, and the voice of Jasper arose above the tumult.

Phelim reached the head of the steps and raising his hands upward he felt the cold marble.

Remembering the manner in which they had entered the passages Phelim pushed with all his might, and, as he supposed, a slab was raised and a flood of moonlight streamed into the opening.

"Hello! dot's business!" shouted a voice near by and a portly figure glided toward the spot.

It was the German, Carl.

He grasped Phelim's hand and assisted him out of the aperture, and helped Richard and Eldora to emerge from the outlet. Not a moment too soon, for the bandits were at hand and their footsteps were heard upon the steps.

Phelim slammed down the slab and leaped upon it. Carl placed his ponderous form upon the marble and exclaimed:

"Now, by jimminty, let us see you get out of dot hole."

CHAPTER XVII.

A HAPPY CONCLUSION.

ALVAREZ heard the tumult in the passages and flung himself against the iron door and shouted until he was hoarse.

To his infinite joy the door was opened and Jasper appeared in the doorway.

"What's the matter, captain?" he shouted as he beheld Alvarez in the vault.

In a few words the villain had explained every thing and the ruffian started in pursuit of the escaping prisoners.

"No use going in that direction," shouted Jasper. "The men are after them. We will take a short cut in this direction."

Jasper darted away, followed by Alvarez, and they reached the outlet where, a short time

previous, Alvarez had met the unknown. The body of Gomez lay in the same spot where it had fallen. The gun-barrels of an armed party glistened in the distance, and before either villain could speak, a rattling discharge of firearms came borne upon the night air and a wild chorus of yells followed.

"What's that?" cried Alvarez.

"Just what I've expected would happen long ago; 'tis the revolutionist band of the 'Red Stars' and it means that we are attacked. It means fight or flight to us," replied Jasper. "See! Our men are making a bold resistance against twice their number."

"Let them come," cried Alvarez; "these ruins are undermined! I'll blow them all to destruction if I see that we are losing ground. Jasper, you know the secret spot where the powder train communicates with the mine;—see that it is fired in case of defeat."

"I'll go and cheer the men on to the attack," shouted Jasper, and before Alvarez could prevent him he had darted away in the bright moonlight among the tombs and monuments in the direction of the struggle.

Alvarez stood near a pedestal upon which a life-size figure cast a shadow in the moonlight. The villain did not observe the statue and it was well that he did not scrutinize it closely for the figure was Eldora—standing upon the pedestal like a statue carved from stone and looking for all the world like the many images and broken figures that here and there arose from the countless tombstones and monuments.

"Why should I fear?" cried Alvarez. "I can now escape and abandon the league to its fate. Here! here are the documents that I have guarded so long—the will of La Vega—here it is safe in my hands—never to leave them!"

He produced the package of documents and waved them triumphantly aloft.

In a moment the figure upon the pedestal leaped down and the papers were whisked out of the villain's hand. He turned mute with surprise to see Eldora with the package in her grasp.

"Those papers! those papers," he gasped; "return them or I will kill you!"

He extended his hand and as he did so the bright moonlight shone upon the palm and revealed the letter imprinted upon the flesh—the letter A.

"The Branded Hand!" shrieked Eldora; "my father's assassin! Found at last, villain—found at last!"

"Yes, found at last!" cried a thrilling voice beside Alvarez, and the figure of the unknown arose from behind a huge tombstone.

"Alvarez! look upon me. You have known me as a man of mystery. 'Twas your work that compelled me to shun the world, but, thank Heaven, the patriot cause of Mexico is in the ascendancy and we defeat the tyrant in every battle. Eldora, you have known me as the hermit and I shunned you because I could not control my feelings in your presence, and the time had not yet arrived for me to reveal myself. Look upon me, Alvarez!"

The figure tore aside the mask and a flowing beard that covered the lower half of his features.

"Don La Vega!" gasped Alvarez, as he tottered against a broken monument; "does the grave give up its dead?"

"Father! father!" shrieked Eldora, and the next instant she was clasped to the bosom of the cloaked figure.

"Not dead!" he said, calmly, "for your weapon failed to deprive me of life. But I lingered between life and death for weeks. When I did recover I found myself shattered, both in mind and body. I searched far and wide for my child, while I dreaded to reveal myself, as a price was placed upon my head ere your murderous arm struck the blow. They believed me dead, and I allowed myself to remain dead to all feeling save revenge. Scoundrel, your hour is at hand!" and La Vega sought his weapon.

Alvarez turned to flee when a rifle cracked close at hand and a pistol-shot echoed the report of the gun.

Alvarez threw his arms upward, and for a moment swayed to and fro; then he fell, face downward, upon the earth, with a bullet imbedded in his brain.

Phelim and Carl emerged from the shadow of a tomb and came forward.

"Begorra, I've settled his hash for him. Bad luck to him! I owed him that, and I always pays my debts like the gentleman that I am."

"Dot's so!" cried Carl. "I helped you to pay it, too," and he held the ponderous horse-pistol up to view.

In a short time the engagement became gen-

eral; shots rung out on the still night air; men grappled in death-struggles mid the graves. "Fear not, daughter," said La Vega. "I am in command of the attacking party, and we will destroy every member of this infamous league. The two leading spirits are dead."

"By golly, I heard dot feller tell der odder one about blowing up everybodies mit powder!" said Carl, suddenly, as he spurned the body of Alvarez with his foot.

"True!" said La Vega; "I must warn my men at once. Here, Richard, take her and guard her until my return."

Richard came forward, and Eldora was soon in his arms.

Obedient Carl's warning, the little party moved away from the ruin, and not a moment too soon.

A dull rumbling sound came from beneath the old ruin; a bright flash seemed to leap into the air; the earth heaved, and then a noise resembling the muttering of distant thunder followed.

Jasper had fired the train, but no great harm had resulted from the act. La Vega's timely warning had baffled the villain's last resort.

As Jasper sought to escape from an exit among the tombs he was shot by one of La Vega's followers.

Both villains had perished, and yet their blood rested not upon Richard, who had just cause to seek their life.

The struggle was soon at an end, and the bandit league entirely destroyed, for the revolutionists took no prisoners.

They remembered the many dastardly deeds of the robbers and spared none.

Carl explained his presence in Mexico and his arrival at the opportune moment to be of assistance to his friends. By mere accident he had discovered the ruins and watched the bandits as they descended into the vaults with the three prisoners. He searched carefully and found an ingress which he used to such advantage that he overpowered a sentry and secured his keys. He narrowly escaped with his life, for Jasper fired at his portly figure as he escaped. The rest is known to the reader.

Eldora leaped upon the pedestal as a place of security, when Alvarez and Jasper suddenly emerged from a tomb near by. Richard and the remainder crouched among the headstones with weapons ready to protect the daring girl.

The reader has witnessed the manner in which she was enabled to secure the valuable documents so long kept from her by Alvarez.

But a few words remain to be written. Richard induced La Vega to dispose of his estates and the Don concluded to sail for the States and reside.

A happy party soon left the shores of Mexico and once more stood beneath the starry flag of the United States.

It was Richard and his promised bride, Eldora La Vega. Phelim and Carl are both inducing La Vega to become an American citizen.

While Richard and Eldora, hand in hand, are whispering of the ceremony that is to make them husband and wife, we will conclude the story by using Phelim's remark to La Vega:

"Jist tell the mayor that yez wants to become an American citizen."

"And what—?"

"That's all of it!"

THE END.

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